# Alya Sometimes Hides Her Feelings in Russian

Sunsunsun

Illustrated by Momoco

4

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"I apologize. I went too far."
"Check it out. Sexyyy, right?"
"Actually, I can't swim."
Ayano Kimishima
Yuki Suou
Maria Mikhailovna Kujou

“Good.
Now, come
on. Let’s go
back.”

“I—I usually
wear a sleep bra!
But I forgot to
pack one...”

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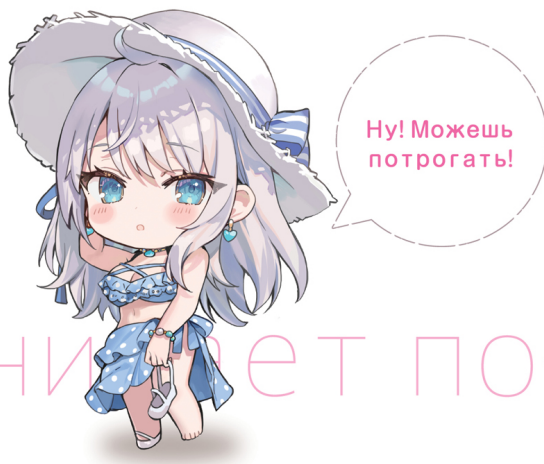

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Sunsunsun
Illustrated by Momoco

YEN ON
New York

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Translation by Matthew Rutsohn
Cover art by Momoco

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PROLOGUE

# A Past Best Forgotten

“Wasting your youth playing all day is the height of folly. Social skills can be improved in adulthood. However, the remarkable physical and mental development you go through during early childhood only happens once in a lifetime, which is why it is crucial to cultivate your skills now. Most mediocre individuals only realize this after reaching adulthood, when it is far too late to do anything about it. Do you understand, Masachika?” said Gensei Suou—a question he had a habit of asking. He would tell me that I mustn’t waste this valuable period of potential growth. Working hard now would save me from unwanted trouble in the future.

“I will have the best learning environment and instructors prepared for you. You have talent. You have a rare gift that exceeds all others, and I will do whatever is necessary for you to excel.”

There was no deceit in those words. Whether it was my studies, the arts, or even martial arts, I absorbed everything I was taught. My instructors and family showered me with praise, and it made me proud of myself.

“Hey, Suou. You coming?”

“Don’t bother, man. Of course he’s not.”

It’s not my fault I have piano practice today. I mean, video games? How is getting better at gaming going to help me with anything? I’m not like you guys. People with talent have to work hard until we discover the limit of our abilities. I have to live up to my grandfather’s

expectations.

"I cannot believe how much English you can speak already. Very impressive, Masachika."

Thank you, Mother. But it isn't enough. I still have potential to grow, so please save all your praise for me until after I get even better.

"I'm sorry, Masachika. Things must have been hectic for you since I've been sleeping the whole day."

What are you talking about, Yuki? Of course you need to sleep due to your frail constitution. Don't worry. I will work hard enough for both of us and become the head of the Suou family household, so you don't have to worry about a thing.

"Are you okay studying all day like this? You deserve to spend more time playing. You're a kid. It's okay to act like one."

Spend more time playing? I just finished playing cards with Yuki and Ayano, Father. In fact, I played for an entire hour, so I should get back to studying. Plus, Mother has looked very awkward whenever she smiles lately. It's like she's forcing herself to praise me. I have to work even harder so she doesn't have to force herself to do anything.

"Oh my. You got your black belt in karate? You really worked hard, didn't you? That's wonderful."

Yeah, she's forcing herself to praise me. This clearly isn't enough to please her. That's why she's refusing to make eye contact, right? Because she doesn't actually feel happy for me? I'm sorry, Mother. I will work hard so you don't have to lie any longer. I will continue working hard until you are genuinely proud of me from the bottom of your heart.

"Sir Masachika? Perhaps you should start getting ready for bed. You need to rest."

I'm fine, Ayano. I still can't grasp my full potential. That's why I need to put in more effort. More importantly, pay more attention to Yuki for me, okay? I can handle myself, so please just focus on her.

"Ya think we're stupid, don'cha?"

"Being born rich doesn't make you special, arrogant jerk."

Shut up. Stop annoying me. Just leave me alone!

"Masachika, you should try to get along with your friends more."

Even the teacher won't leave me alone. Those people aren't my friends. They're scum. All they do is get in my way and hold me back. I don't have time to waste on them. I honestly don't want to come to school. There's not enough time in the day for all this. I have to work harder, or Mother will never smile from the bottom of her heart again!

“Just stay home. Nobody wants you here.”

“Seriously. Why do you still come to school?”

Shut up, you little twerps. My sister wishes she could come to school, but she can’t. The slightest bit of exercise sends her into a coughing fit. She can’t even go outside.

“She has childhood asthma, and her symptoms are rather severe. Not only changes in environment or temperature, but heightened emotions could also worsen her symptoms, so please keep a close eye on her.”

Can you believe it? Yuki can’t get angry or cry. She can’t yell or laugh. Not only is she a prisoner of her body, but her illness robs her of her emotions, too. And yet she doesn’t complain at all. She forces herself to smile so she won’t cause trouble for anyone.

Who wants to be with you assholes? I’d be with Yuki right now if I had a choice. But I don’t want to make her sad or worry… That’s why I have to go to school—for her sake as well!

“You have to leave for work again?! You’re never home!”

“I’m sorry. I really wish I could spend more time with the family, but—”

“You’re always like this! Do you seriously think apologizing’s going to make everything okay?!”

Why…? Why is Mother this angry? Don’t yell. I want to see you smile like you used to. I promise I’ll work hard, so please don’t get mad at Father. Oh, I know. I’ll play that song Mother told me she liked. Chopin’s… What was it again? It was a really hard piece, but I’ll make sure to practice until I can play it for her. Surely then, she’ll…

“Stop playing that this instant!”

…I thought it would make her happy. Why?! I practiced really hard! I spent all this time learning and studying, and I never wasted any time playing! I was picked on at school for being “arrogant”! And you know what?! I didn’t care about any of that! Because Mother always praised me. Because Yuki always admired me. Why won’t she acknowledge how hard I’ve been working?! Praise me! Rub my head and tell me I’m doing a good job like you used to!

“Do not worry about Yumi—about your mother. Just keep working hard like you have been.”

Like I have been? You want me to continue to work hard like this? How the hell am I supposed to do that? Why? Why won’t anyone recognize the pain that I’m in?! It hurts. It’s too much. I feel like I can’t breathe trying to live up to my grandfather’s expectations. I feel like I

can't breathe around my mother. I feel like I can't breathe…when Yuki and Ayano look up at me with such innocence in their eyes. I can't take it anymore. I don't…want to be here anymore.

"What's wrong, Suou? Not going straight home today?"

"Yo, man. I don't think Mommy and Daddy are gonna be happy when they hear you're trying to skip your piano lessons."

Annoying idiots. They really are aggravating. They just never know when to shut up. Maybe I should make them shut up? Then—No. They aren't even worth my time. I'll just ignore them. I have to ignore them…

"Tsk. Is that how it's gonna be? Arrogant little punk."

"His sister's way more fun to pick on."

"His sister?"

"Yeah, she hasn't come to school at all lately, though."

Ignore them. Just ignore them…

"She thinks she's a little princess. It's so annoying. I took her pencil case, and she was like, 'Give that baaack,' and then she just fell on her face."

"Seriously? Probably has a butler to feed her at home. That's why she's so weak."

"I bet she stays locked in her room all day and plays piano or something."

"Ha-ha-ha!"

Ignore them…!

……

"Welcome, Masachika! Long time no see!"

"Oh, you're finally here! Masachika, I heard what happened. You beat up four of your classmates, huh? Good job! You're a real man now!"

"Grandpa! What do you think you're doing? Don't praise him for that."

"He's already been lectured enough, hasn't he? Besides, I find it hard to believe he'd ever hurt anyone without a good reason. A man only throws a punch when he has no choice but to put his foot down. Right, Masachika?"

"*Sigh*… Anyway, you can stay here as long as you'd like, okay?"

"Hell, you can even live with us if you want. Oh, hey! Let Grandpa here show ya his collection of Russian stuff!"

…Why is he praising me like this? It doesn't make any sense. It's so different from the Suou household that my brain can't process

what's going on.

"You already understand this much Russian? Wow! You really are Kyoutarou's son."

I didn't do anything special, and being praised like this doesn't make me happy at all. There's only one person who I want to praise me, and being complimented by anyone else just feels empty.

"**<**Wait. You can speak Russian? That's awesome!**>**"

It feels empty. All I feel is emptiness…

"**<**Wow! You really can do anything! You're so cool!**>**"

That's… I…

"**<**You can play piano? I wanna hear you play! Hey, can I listen to you play next time I see you? It's a promise, then!**>**"

There's only one person…

"**<**Masaaachika!**>**"

……

CHAPTER 1

# Do stomach fetishes even exist?

“Big brother, wake up.”

It was a dimly lit room, quiet as could be. Only the faint sounds of cicadas chirping and the air conditioner filled the space. That is, until the sweet whispers of a young lady shook the serenity of the room. The young man didn’t open his eyes at the sound of her voice, but instead, his brow furrowed a bit, and he squirmed in his bed.

“If you don’t wake up…I’m going to kiss you.”

There was no frustration in her voice. If anything, she sounded somewhat happy as her soft murmurs echoed in the quiet room once more. However, the young man still showed no signs of waking, so the young lady’s lips faintly curled into a smile…and then into a huge grin before she yelled excitedly:

“Time’s up! You lose! *Nom!*”

“Ouch?!”

A sharp pain suddenly shot down the young man’s nape—Masachika Kuze’s nape—so his hand flew up to touch the back of his neck.

“Oh, you’re awake.”

“Of course I am! The hell is wrong with you?!”

He glared at the young lady—Yuki Suou, his sister—who was sitting on the edge of his bed, but she didn’t even blink. Instead, she taunted him.

“I told you I was going to kiss you if you didn’t wake up.”

“When? And what kind of kiss was that?”

“You’ve never heard of a love-bite?”

“You bit me like a damn snake.”

Yuki raised a brow in surprise at his *biting* remark.

“What? Do you want me to give you a normal kiss instead? Fine… Oh, but you just woke up and have morning breath, so do you think you could at least rinse your mouth for me?”

“What bizarre kind of kiss do you plan on giving me? No thanks.”

“Oh, don’t pretend like you don’t want one. We used to always kiss when we were kids and playing around.”

“Not as far as I remember.”

“Ouch. Cold. Did ya really forget how it felt to kiss me? Tsk. Fine…I’ll just make ya remember.”

She reached to undo the buttons on her shirt…until she realized she was wearing a T-shirt, so she stretched the collar with her fingers while slowly climbing onto the bed. She smirked like some conceited womanizer, crawling closer to him.

“Nah, I’m good.”

“Mfft?!”

A rolled-up summer blanket hit Yuki right in the face, sending her off the side of the bed with a muffled yelp. Immediately, she wrapped the blanket around her body pitifully and put a hand over her mouth to pretend like she had burst into tears.

“I can’t believe you! You’re terrible! You stole my first kiss, and this is how you treat me?!”

“…Even if we pretend something like that happened long ago, I would be the one robbed of my first kiss, not you.”

He glared at his sister reproachfully for making it seem like she was a tragic heroine who’d been pumped and dumped by some awful man, but Yuki continued to act the victim.

“You’re trying to make me sound like the bad guy now, huh? Men never take responsibility for their actions.”

“You have absolutely zero experience with men, so stop pretending you know anything about them!”

“You’re right… You’re the only man I have ever cared for. I only love you, and yet…!”

“Oh, shut up.”

“And yet…it appears you aren’t satisfied with only one woman…”

“The hell are you even talking about?”

Masachika seemed exhausted, but he still winced when Yuki hit

him with a sharp glare.

"You still plan on playing dumb?! I know you've been bringing other women home behind my back!"

"…!"

His heart skipped a beat, because he had a good idea who she was talking about.

*How did she know that?! Wait. She's trying to trick me into admitting it. There's no way she'd know about that. I have to act calm and cool!*

The instant he came to that decision, he masked his shock and looked at her with disgust.

"How long do you plan on keeping this little charade up?"

"Don't act like you don't know!"

"What? I'm not."

"Then how do you explain…this?!" Yuki shouted as she held out her hand. Pinched in between her thumb and index finger…was a strand of white hair, glittering in the sunlight peeking in from the slightly ajar curtains. A cold sweat suddenly began to slide down Masachika's back.

"It's hers, isn't it? I found it by your pillow! How could you do this to me?! Bringing another woman with you to bed to do who knows what! Sickening!"

"No… No…! That's not true! I didn't let her inside my room!"

"Oh? So you admit you brought her home, huh?"

"Huh…?"

Yuki had dropped the performance out of nowhere and was now glaring at him in disappointment. While Masachika's jaw dropped, Yuki swiftly thrust the hair forward at him with a smug, contemptuous smirk.

"Take a closer look… It's Grandpa's hair!"

"What?!"

"Mwa-ha-ha! You fell for it! Consider this payback for the closing ceremony!"

Masachika's eyes narrowed at his sister's boastful cackling as he tried to defend himself.

"'Payback'? Pretty rich coming from the girl who went all psychological warfare on Alya after drugging me. You attacked us first."

"Well, it is a competition, is it not? I can't treat you special just because we're family. Besides…"

"'Besides'…?"

Yuki's expression suddenly became serious as she kneeled on the edge of the bed. Masachika saw this and straightened up a bit.

"…there is something I have noticed recently."

"What's that?"

"It's…"

She spoke earnestly—unusual for her—while she stared off into the distance.

"To tell the truth…I might be a villainess."

"…All right? Explain," he encouraged unenthusiastically.

"Think about it objectively. At school, I am seen as the model young gentlewoman who comes from a prestigious family. I even have Ayano as my maid."

"Sure."

"Meanwhile, Alya is a transfer student from a family of commoners. She might have the highest grades among the first-years, but people at school tend to keep their distance from her."

"…Sure, I guess."

"And now we're campaign rivals. We're duking it out on the election stage."

"Uh-huh."

Yuki raised an eyebrow while staring hard at her brother.

"…"

"…Staring at me like 'Know what I mean?' isn't helping me understand you any better."

"Look at the positions we're in. I'm obviously the villainess in this scenario."

"…Yeah, I guess I can see that."

"If things keep going as they are now, you're going to expose me at the closing ceremony next year in March for wrongdoings during the campaign, then you're going to tell me you never want to see me again, and I'm going to be kicked out of school."

"Well, I am the foolish prince in this scenario, after all."

"Then the Suou family is going to disown me and kick Ayano and me out with only the clothes on our backs."

"Oh, you're going to bring Ayano with you, huh?"

"After that, I'd be scouted by Hachioji, the president of the student council at Teiou Academy, and become the vice president of the student council there."

"You'd be scouted by who at what academy?"

"And then after joining forces with Hachioji, we'd take over Seirei

Academy and merge the school into ours! More of a hostile takeover, I suppose."

"Wow. That's a lot of power your new student council has. Wait. What's going to happen to Alya and me?"

"Huh? You'd be executed as representatives of the losing school, of course."

"Harsh. Ha-ha."

"But evil still lurks in the darkness! Yes, it was Ayano who was actually pulling the strings from behind the scenes the entire time!"

"Wh-whaaaaaat?!"

"Tune in next time! 'Kimishima of the Rebellion: Episode II'! A great conspiracy beyond anything imaginable is about to shake Japan to its core!"

"I didn't see that one coming."

"And that's why I'm apparently the villain, so I'm going to do *whatever* it takes to win the election!"

"Wow. Clap, clap, clap," replied Masachika apathetically as he clapped. Yuki, on the other hand, was staring up at the ceiling with her arms raised in victory. Then she cast a meaningful sidelong glance at her brother.

"Joking aside, Ayano took really good care of you…*in bed*…thanks to my little scheme, so you're welcome."

"Don't pause and say 'in bed' like that. We didn't do anything weird."

"Yeah, I heard. *Sigh*… A beautiful young woman is begging to wash your back and sleep by your side in bed, and you tell her 'no'? Are you really a man?"

"What are you getting after me for? If anything, you should praise me for being a gentleman."

"'Shameful is he who spurns a woman's invitation.' Plus, Ayano was wearing a really revealing summertime maid uniform. It had a perfect opening under the ribbon around her neck for you to just stuff your hand into her cleavage."

"…Have you stuffed your hand into her cleavage before?"

"Of course. It was so warm and soft. Best feeling ever."

Masachika coldly glared at his sister for her smug confession of sexual harassment, but she simply shook her head as if he was the crazy one.

"You had the perfect get-out-of-jail-free card, and you blew it. You could have just said that the fever caused temporary madness or

something. You know how people say that for some reason you can cure a cold by giving it to someone else? Well, you could have used that as an excuse to throw yourself all over her, and yet…you wasted it. You wasted the perfect chance to get some action. You could have at least grabbed a titty or something. I'm just…disappointed in you, bro."

"I'm disappointed in what you just said."

"More importantly, I had no idea you snuck Alya into your place. Look at you, player."

She suddenly grinned and slowly approached him, but he immediately averted his gaze awkwardly.

"…Nothing happened."

"Uh-huh… Two hormone-driven teenagers alone all day under the same roof, and you're telling me nothing happened? Give me a break."

"Seriously, nothing happened. We just…"

"You just…?"

"We just did our summer-break homework…"

"…"

Her excitement faded. She leaned back, then tilted her head to the side in mute amazement without even blinking.

"…You did homework? You invited Alya all the way over to your house just to do homework?"

"…Yeah."

"During summer break? Your only summer break as a first-year high school student? The time most teenagers around the world openly revel in the joys of their youth?"

"…Yeah."

"…And I'm guessing it wasn't just a onetime thing, judging from your reaction."

"…She came over three or so times."

"Are you stupid or something?"

Masachika couldn't argue when she insulted him with a straight face, and he looked away. Even *he* honestly felt there was something wrong with himself. Despite the fact that he'd asked Alisa if they could hang out during summer break on the way home from the closing ceremony, he'd been having a hard time finding an excuse to actually invite her…but he could easily imagine the entire summer going by without him ever thinking of anything. Furthermore, he couldn't count on Alisa ever asking him first, so after hours of racking his brain, the best he could come up with was: *"Hey, do you want to do our summer*

*homework together?"*

Over the next three days, they quietly did their homework together at the Kuze residence without even a morsel of the sweetness you would see in a romantic comedy. And although they'd already been able to finish a lot of summer homework thanks to that, Masachika began to feel as though Alisa was slowly becoming stiffer and much less content by the day. Perhaps it was nothing more than his imagination, though.

"Unbelievable. You didn't even take her to your room…which means you did your homework together in the living room?"

"…Yeah." Masachika nodded half-heartedly. His sister's eyes widened in shock, and she slammed her hand down on the bed.

"You idiot! When you bring a girl home to study, you're supposed to take her to your room and work together at your desk! That's how the trope usually goes!"

"But that's when the character's parents are home…"

"Nobody was home, which is all the more reason you should have brought her to your room! Then the moment she leaned forward and you got a peek at her chest, it would warm your heart, and when she got on all fours and you saw the shape of her ass, it would warm your crotch!"

"Don't say 'warm your crotch.'"

"Then when you spill your tea on her white shirt, which'll make it see-through, you can try to dry her off with a towel, which will naturally allow you to touch her body! After that, you can let her use your bath while you dry her clothes, then you can lend her one of your oversize shirts to wear! And trust me! The moment you see her when she's fresh out of the tub with one of your shirts on, your heart's not gonna be the only thing throbbing! I'm talkin' about your—"

"Enough!"

"Pfft?!"

Masachika threw a pillow at his sister for making such problematic remarks so early in the day—before they even had breakfast. The pillow smacked her in the face, and she fell back. He silently approached her, grabbed the summer blanket nearby, and wrapped it around her before tying both ends into a knot. He then tossed her onto the bed like a bag of trash, giving her no choice but to calm down as he yawned and walked out of the room. That was when his eyes suddenly met those of a maid who was wiping the table in the living room. Ayano and Yuki had been staying at the Kuze residence since

the previous day, as it was summer break.

"Good morning, Sir Masachika."

"Yeah… Good morning."

Masachika quirked a brow at Ayano, who immediately straightened her posture and bowed.

"You changed into your uniform this morning just to do a little cleaning? You could have worn something more casual since we're going to be heading out soon."

Today, they were going to an amusement park at Yuki's earnest request. They were planning on leaving the house before noon, so Masachika thought it would have been more convenient for Ayano to be wearing whatever she was going to wear out today. That would mean she wouldn't have to change twice. However…

"Wearing formal attire suited to my work is not only natural but expected," she replied as if this was normal.

"…Is that so?"

While he felt it was unnecessary, Ayano herself seemed to switch into "maid mode" after changing into her uniform and styling her hair, so he didn't argue with her any further. Honestly, unlike Yuki—who changed completely when she put her hair into a ponytail and switched to "little-sister mode"—Ayano seemed pretty much the same even after tying her hair up. Nevertheless, different people fired themselves up in different ways, so there was no use trying to make sense of it. Once Masachika reached that conclusion, he decided to head to the toilet and relieve himself before leaving the house. After rinsing out his mouth and washing his hands, he also washed his face to wake himself up, then returned to his room to change when…

*"Zzz…"*

"Nothing can kill you, can it?"

Yuki was (pretending to be) sound asleep on the bed, despite being wrapped in a summer blanket like a Christmas present, so Masachika unleashed a powerful ax kick onto her defenseless body—except instead of his heel, he used his thigh, and it wasn't powerful at all but instead a soft tap to her side.

"Hmm?"

She opened an eye and yawned widely.

"Huh? Time for breakfast already?"

"That's some attitude you have for a restrained crook."

"Hey, guard. Ya got any booze?"

"Oh, you're gonna feed me information, huh?"

“Mmm… It happened so long ago, I’m having trouble remembering. Get my drift?”

“All right, I’m out.”

“Go to the bar he used to hang out at and search the second floor. I think you’ll discover something you’ll find…interesting.”

“Then you give me a hint the moment I get annoyed and leave. How cliché.”

“Heh…”

She smiled with evident satisfaction, then spread out her arms, peeling the summer blanket off her… She then peeled…and peeled… and…

“Nngh! Guh…!”

“…”

Oops. She seemed to be having a hard time getting it off. Yuki leaned back, wrapped in the summer blanket, while flailing her legs like a maniac. Masachika unenthusiastically watched for a few moments until he eventually got fed up, crouched by her side, and untied the knot in the blanket. His sister instantly smirked with dripping confidence, rotating her head and pretending to crack her neck as she rose to her feet.

“Good grief… About time you got here. It looks like it’s my turn to make a move.”

“Ah, the trope where you’re saved by your lackey, escape prison, and are actually a superstrong character and not some pathetic bum like you pretended to be… What are we doing?” he wondered aloud wearily before lowering Yuki off the bed and tossing himself facedown on the sheets in her place.

“Hey, now. Don’t tell me you’re tired already. You just woke up. Where’s the excitement?”

“I should be asking you how you can be so excited this early in the morning.”

“Do I have to spell it out for you? I’m trying to make you feel better because you apparently had a bad dream.”

“Huh? ‘A bad dream’?”

He rolled over onto his back and traced his memories. He frowned as he vaguely recalled a dream about a memory from long ago. Yuki placed her hand on her chest.

“If you want to be held and cry in my arms, I’m here for ya, bro,” she promised with a sidelong glance. She may have hidden her thoughtfulness and love with her joking remark, but Masachika was

grateful, albeit somewhat embarrassed. She would always invite herself over with Ayano in order to take care of her brother, who essentially lived by himself. While she may always claim that she came by because she was lonely, she was actually probably more concerned that her brother was feeling like he was all alone in this world.

*I still draw the line when she tries to sleep in the same bed as me while bringing Ayano along with her…*

He smirked, recalling their exchange from the previous night, and teased his sister: "I'd like to cry in your arms, but there's not enough cushion, if you know what I mean."

"They're more than big enough to squeeze, dammit! Or what…?! Are you saying that the only boobs you recognize as boobs are the ones that are too big to even fit in your hands?!"

Yuki immediately put her hands under her breasts to push them up. His eyes narrowed at her extremely unattractive behavior, then he corrected her misunderstanding.

"Being big enough to squeeze already means they're huge… Ahem. Regardless of how big they are, you're really skinny, so I'd be afraid one of your ribs would poke me."

"Then how about you just come over here and see for yourself?! Drown in my motherly love! Hi-yaaah!"

"Mnff!"

Not even a second went by, and she was already straddling him on the bed, holding his head in her arms and rubbing it between her breasts. A soft sensation caressed his cheeks as the tip of his nose pushed against her sternum.

"Heh! What'd ya think of that? Could you feel my motherly love?"

"I definitely felt some paternal love in there. You should eat a little more."

"I am! I just don't get fat, no matter how much I eat!" Yuki raged, releasing Masachika's head and sitting upright.

"*Sigh*… It looks like my tits are just no match for the Kujou sisters."

Still straddling his stomach, she dramatically put her hand to her forehead and shook her head.

"Don't call them 'tits.'"

"And fighting back with my ass or legs would be difficult as well… Plus, if we're judging people by their ass and legs, then you can't count Nonoa out, since she is definitely the dark horse here…"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

“You haven’t noticed those seductive hips of hers? Tsk! This is why booby-lovers disgust me…”

“Hey, are you going to keep rambling like this for a while? Because if you are, do you think you could wake me up when you’re finished?”

He closed his eyes to go back to sleep as though there wasn’t anything unusual about having his sister sit on his stomach. With her hand still on her forehead, she huffed out a cynical “hmph.”

“We shouldn’t rush for a conclusion, bro. There’s no way to win against those three when it comes to ass, titties, and legs, since their Westerner genetics give them an advantage. Therefore…”

She slowly lifted up her shirt, revealing her cute belly button and faintly protruding ribs while wearing a smug grin.

“…I have decided to fight back with my stomach.”

“Oh. Your stomach, huh?”

“Hee-hee! What do you think? Check out this smooth, soft stomach of mine. Makes you just want to rub your cheeks against it, doesn’t it?”

“Not really…”

“Heh! You don’t need to lie to me, bro. You’re starting to feel things you’ve never felt before now, aren’t you? New doors are opening before you.”

“Sorry, but I never even had a door for stomach fetishes to begin with.”

“Then I’ll make you one. A gateway to a new world. A door that won’t bore.”

“Was that supposed to be a haiku?”

“Hey, are you trashing my line?”

“Nothing gets by you.”

“Oh-ho, I get it. Deny it all you want, but you know our minds are one. Plus, I can read your otaku thoughts like a book—or, well, manga.”

“Fair enough.”

Actually, Masachika knew how Yuki felt, since he could also read her mind to a degree, being a fellow nerd who’d known her his entire life. Though that didn’t mean he could predict some of the outlandish things she did, and she was extremely sharp when it came to understanding how his nerdy brain worked as well.

“So?”

“‘So’ what?”

“Have a stomach fetish now?”

“Nope. Not even a little.”

“Tsk. So it’s tits, huh? You just looove tits. Well, check out the underboob on these pups.”

With a smirk on her face, she pulled up her shirt some more, twisting her upper body back and forth. While most guys at school would drool at the sight, Masachika…

*“Zzz…”*

“Tsk. Stop pretending like you’re asleep. I’m not even wearing a bra, you punk. Your nose should be spewing blood like a fountain.”

“…”

“Oh, come on. How can you not see how sexy this is?” she replied with a pout. Yuki then took out her phone, raised it into the air, and adjusted her rear a tad before taking a selfie. She looked at the picture, which was of her straddling the lower half of Masachika’s stomach with her shirt rolled all the way to her chest, and gulped.

“Oh yeah… That’s deep in there.”

“Shut up.”

“I should send this to Alya. Hmm… ‘Masachika’s raring to go today, as usual.’”

“You’re a monster!”

“Oh, wait! I could pretend I’ve sent it to the wrong person and say something like ‘You were wonderful last night, Masachika.’ Should I do it?!”

“Okay, I’m wrapping you up again.”

After swiftly sitting up, he snatched her phone and wrapped her in the summer blanket once more. The motion was surprisingly skillful and fast—no more than four seconds. “Select and…delete.”

“Ahhh! H-how dare you look through my phone! You’re a devil!”

Ignoring her pleas, Masachika deleted the selfie she took.

“I’m being abused! I demand to talk to a lawyer!”

He effortlessly picked up his sister, who was flailing her arms and legs while involuntarily cosplaying as what appeared to be a bagworm.

“Yeah, yeah. Time to go back to your cave under the bed.”

His voice was sweet, like he was releasing a rescued animal back into the wild, as he slowly stuffed her under his bed.

“Ack! It’s way too narrow! I—”

“Yeah, yeah. You’ve been naughty, so you’re going back to where you belong.”

“Hey! I’m serious! There’s no way I’m going to fit, especially with this blanket wrapped around me! It’s…so tight…”

“Don’t be shy. You like tight places, right?”

He continued to stuff his sister under the bed, paying no mind to her pleas…until she suddenly began to shout distressingly.

“Masachika, wait! You’re hurting me! It hurts! Stop trying to stuff it in like that! Th-there’s no way it’s going to fit all the way!”

“…”

“Huh?! Y-you’re seriously just going to ignore me?! I-it really does hurt— Ayano, help!”

“Did you call for me, Lady Yuki?!”

“Put your weapons down, Ayano.”

Equipped in Ayano’s right hand were three metallic, ridiculously sharp pens as she rushed into the room. She surveyed the area, slowly blinking when she saw Yuki wrapped in a summer blanket with the right half of her body stuffed under the bed and Masachika squatting by her side. She observed the almost-incomprehensible situation with a blank expression, and her head tilted to the side for a few seconds… before she swiftly straightened her neck once more.

“…Oh, did you get stuck? Allow me to help you, Sir Masachika.”

She squatted by his side and began to pull Yuki out.

“…Well, at least I know now what kind of person Ayano thinks I am.”

“You reap what you sow.”

Her maid, the person she trusted the most, misunderstood and thought Yuki had tried to crawl under the bed on her own.

As they slowly pulled her out, Yuki stared into the distance, wondering where she went wrong for the person she trusted the most to assume she’d been doing who-knows-what underneath someone’s bed.

◇

“…What are you wearing?”

“It’s a disguise,” Yuki replied casually while pushing up the brim of her hat, unfazed by her brother’s disgusted gaze. After finishing breakfast, which Ayano had prepared, everyone had gotten ready in different rooms before regrouping in the living room, but Yuki’s attire

was…something else. She was wearing shorts with suspenders and a T-shirt of an anime high school girl playing the bass. She had her hair tied in pigtails under a beret, and to top things off, she was wearing oversize sunglasses… Plus, her small frame wasn't doing her any favors today, because she did not look one bit like a high schooler—maybe a middle school student at most. Some people may even mistake her as a kid in elementary school. Nevertheless, Yuki herself didn't seem concerned as she placed a hand on the brim of her beret with a smirk that screamed "narcissist."

"Heh! Not even wearing a disguise can hide how adowably cute I am…"

"You're 'adowable,' huh?"

"Yep."

She made two peace signs over her chin while smugly looking up at him. *She's even acting like a snotty little brat*, Masachika thought, scratching his head.

"But…why do you need a disguise?"

"Because we might run into someone we know, like we ran into Alya that one time. Don't forget we're campaign rivals at school right now. Wouldn't want any weird speculation being made about us."

"I'm pretty sure it's already well established that we're best friends and grew up together."

"I'm just being careful. Better to not stir the pot when given the option."

"Uh-huh…"

*Wearing a terrible disguise is just going to make things worse if someone catches us*, he thought, but telling her that was more trouble than it was worth, so he half-heartedly nodded back at her instead. Masachika then looked over at the unrefined and unapproachable young woman standing next to his sister. It was Ayano, naturally. She was wearing a bland blouse and a bland skirt. Her thick, black hair—tied up a few moments ago when she was doing housework—was now hanging over her eyes, which were already hardly visible due to the huge glasses covering her face. She looked like the kind of girl you would see in anime where she was actually really beautiful once she took off her glasses.

"…Ayano."

"Yes, Sir Masachika."

"I'm telling you this for your own good. Go change into something else."

“But…”

“Just do it. A beautiful young girl in high school like you shouldn’t go out dressed like that.”

“…”

Ayano’s eyes wavered as if she was troubled by his words, so she looked to Yuki for guidance, but Masachika immediately spoke up as if he knew this was coming and urged Yuki to reconsider.

“You’re free to wear a disguise and do whatever you want, but this is too cruel. You shouldn’t make a cute girl in her prime dress like this.”

“It works *because* she’s cute. Obviously, she’d look like a train wreck if she weren’t.”

“Apologize to every not-cute girl in Japan. This instant,” he replied with a disgusted gaze before facing Ayano once more.

“‘Cute’…”

“…?”

Although her expression was blank, Ayano’s hands were on her cheeks, and it kind of looked like she was blushing if you squinted? Maybe? Regardless, she immediately noticed Masachika’s skeptical glance, then promptly lowered her hands and adjusted her posture. Yuki gave in.

“Fine. You can go change into something else, Ayano.”

“As you wish.”

She bowed to her master and headed over to Yuki’s room, where her belongings were. After a few seconds of watching her walk away, it suddenly hit Masachika.

“Oh. She was…blushing, wasn’t she?”

“Yeah, obviously.”

“‘Obviously’? Just because I complimented her, though? Weird.”

“Hmm… Yeah, I know what you mean.” Yuki nodded as if she could empathize.

Masachika was troubled by Ayano’s reaction—something that would be considered normal if she was just any ordinary girl. It didn’t help that he completely thought she’d been ignoring him at first. He then timidly asked:

“Hey… Ayano’s not interested in me…romantically, right?”

“As far as I know from what she has told me, she’s not.”

“Thought so…”

What Ayano felt toward Masachika and Yuki was clearly love and respect, but it was the kind of feeling a servant would have toward her

masters. She had told them that herself, and Masachika had accepted this because if it was Ayano's desire to devote herself to him as his maid, then why deny her of that?

However…if even a fragment of her devotion came from some sort of romantic feelings, then Masachika would have to consider how to deal with it. Ayano treated both siblings equally and behaved the same way around them for the most part. Never once did he ever feel she treated them differently based on their gender. That was why he recognized that she was telling the truth…but it was hard not to be skeptical after seeing her blush like that.

"Are you concerned, my dear brother?"

"It's just… I find it hard to believe anyone would blush like that when someone who is basically family merely compliments their appearance."

"Hmm… Yeah, I see what you mean."

Yuki stroked her chin as though she was deeply pondering his words until she was struck with an epiphany.

"Then how about we check how she feels?"

"…? How would we do that?"

Masachika got a bad feeling in his gut when he saw his sister's lips curl upward, but before he could stop her, she was already making a megaphone with her hands and yelling toward her room:

"Ayano! Come over here for a second! Come on, hurry! Don't worry if you haven't finished changing. Just get over here!"

The door to her room could be heard immediately opening and closing before rushing footsteps filled the hallway.

"You called for me, Lady Yuki?" asked Ayano, opening the door to the living room.

"Pfft!"

Masachika's eyes went wide, and he burst into laughter the instant he saw her…because she was wearing nothing but light-purple undergarments. Calling what she was wearing lingerie would probably be more fitting, and they were more sexy than fashionable, which only made it worse. Her undergarments clearly emphasized her cleavage while revealing her thin waist and small rear, which was only complemented by her long legs. Her body wasn't as delicate as Yuki's, but she still had a rather impressive figure. To top it all off, her thick, dark black hair hung over her snow-white skin. She looked literally breathtakingly seductive to Masachika.

"Good job, Ayano. That's perfect."

“What’s ‘perfect’ about this?! Ayano! Cover yourself!”

“I have nothing to hide before you two.”

“I can see many things you should hide!” shouted Masachika in almost a scream as he looked away. Despite being rather delicate, she had very defined, feminine curves, and no matter how much Masachika thought of her as family, there was no way he could hide his panic before her half naked body.

*You couldn’t even compare this to Yuki’s completely nude body! It was on an entirely different level!*

Yuki, on the other hand, briskly walked over to Ayano and said to Masachika behind her:

“Look at all her beauty marks, bro. She’s so sexy, isn’t she?”

“I have no idea where you’re pointing. Anyway, Ayano, go finish changing already, okay?”

“Lady Yuki…”

“Mmm… Fine. I’m sorry for suddenly asking you to come out here like this. You can go back now.”

“It was my pleasure. I shall return shortly.”

Only when he heard the sound of the door opening and closing echoing down the hall did Masachika’s face finally return to normal. He glared at his sister.

“So? What was the point of that?”

“Hmm? I was checking whether Ayano saw you as a man or as family. After all, most women would be embarrassed to be caught in their underwear by a man if he wasn’t family.”

“Yeah…”

Masachika was taken aback by the fact that she had a good reason for what she did, and naturally, he agreed. Most people would be less embarrassed if they were seen by a member of their family.

“Anyway, what do you think, judging by how she reacted?” he asked his sister.

“Hmm? No clue.”

“Huh?”

“She did seem a little embarrassed, maybe? But her expression never changes, you know? So if you asked me whether she was embarrassed because she saw you as someone who’s datable, then…it’s anyone’s guess.”

“Thanks for wasting my time.”

But Yuki stared back into his disgusted eyes with a meaningful gaze of her own.

“At the very least, we now know that you view Ayano as more than ‘just family.’”

“…”

He was at a loss for words. Masachika himself was aware of the sexual attraction he felt when he saw Ayano in her underwear, so there was nothing to argue. Taking pleasure in seeing her brother silenced, Yuki suddenly smirked with a somewhat consoling gaze.

“By the way, I love you more than anyone else in the entire world, but as a member of my family and as my brother, you seeing me naked doesn’t embarrass me at all. I’m really sorry to disappoint you. Sorry that I’m not the kind of little sister who screams and throws something at her brother when he walks in on her changing.”

“I have no idea why I’m being apologized to, but I’d appreciate it if you were at least a little embarrassed. The fact that you’re not makes me worried about you as a woman in the middle of puberty.”

“Come on. Would someone with a normal sense of shame for a girl her age really wear something as crazy as this outside?”

“So you do realize how crazy you look?! And wipe that smug look off your face!”

“My dear brother…can I be honest with you? Being fifteen and wearing my hair in pigtails…is rough.”

“Who would have thought?” Masachika replied with a straight face as Yuki stared into the distance with a somewhat melancholic smile.

“But you know what? When I saw myself in the mirror, I started to shake. I was like, ‘Seriously? How do I look this good?’”

“It hurts to admit, but you do look good.”

“You say that, and yet your expression hardly even changed when you saw me. I suppose you’d have preferred it if I wore my hair in a ponytail?”

“What makes you think that?”

“Huh? Because you like ponytails, right?”

“Hmm… Well, I can’t deny that I do like ponytails, but you’re kind of missing the point.”

“What do you mean?”

His strange, theatrical behavior piqued her interest, so she knit her brow and looked at him seriously. Masachika smirked and continued:

“Of course, everyone loves a good ponytail, but…the best part about ponytails is when people who usually have their hair tied up untie them and let their hair down.”

“Uh-huh. Oh, it looks like we can make the next train if we leave

now. By the way, don't you think these route-finder apps really underestimate how fast the average person walks?"

"At least pretend like you're interested in what I have to say! And I think those apps use the average elderly person's walking speed when coming up with the times!"

"What elderly person needs eight whole minutes to switch platforms?"

"You're just used to seeing our grandparents, who still move around a lot. The average old person around town won't be able to chase a runaway dog two hundred meters, let alone catch them."

"Yeah, they'd usually have to use a bike, huh?"

"No, that's not— Whatever."

There was so much wrong with what she'd said that Masachika felt a bit exhausted…until his eyes eventually caught sight of Ayano, who had changed and was quietly putting her hair up in a ponytail.

"…"

"Um… Ayano? Why are you putting your hair into a ponytail?"

"…? Because the amusement park probably has rules about having really long hair that is not tied back."

"Huh? O-oh… Okay."

"…?"

"Wow, someone check out this guy's ego. My brother thinks everything's about him. How embarrassing ♪," Yuki taunted while pointing both index fingers at his face.

"Shut up!" Masachika shouted, trying to hide his embarrassment. Ayano just tilted her head to the side with her usual blank expression. Their exchange went on and on like this…until it was too late, and they missed their train.

CHAPTER 2

# Otaku are so annoying.

The jaunty jingles playing from the attractions meshed with the roaring echoes of the roller coasters sliding across the rails as the three students, in somewhat high spirits for a change, walked through the amusement park. None of them really had much experience with amusement parks, especially Yuki, whose idea it was to come here today, so her sparkling eyes were darting in each and every direction.

"It feels like forever since we last came to an amusement park together. I think the last time we were here was during sixth-grade summer vacation, right?"

"Yeah, it was when we were staying at Grandpa and Grandma's house and they took us."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I remember us being so excited and getting soaked by the huge splash from that log-flume ride." Yuki repeatedly nodded, grinning as though to say, "We were so young back then."

"You seem to be misremembering things, so let me refresh your memory. *You* got a little too excited, and you alone decided to jump into the splash," Masachika pointed out while rolling his eyes, and Yuki's smile froze. He wasn't going to let her try to rewrite history and get away with it. The log-flume ride at the amusement park in their memories was made so you could stand on a small bridge, which hung over the attraction's landing pool, and get splashed head-on by the impact when the wood log crashed into said pool. Of course, the center of the bridge had a clear dome-like shield to keep people from getting

wet, but Yuki, for some unknown reason, had leaped out into the open the moment the log hit the water. It was such a powerful splash that Masachika was overcome with panic and thought, *Yuki's going to get hurt*, before immediately jumping out to protect her. That was what really happened.

"Even my underwear and socks got soaked thanks to you."

"…"

"And Grandpa and Grandma were worried we'd catch a cold, so we had to leave early even though it was still barely past noon and—"

"Shut yer mouth, or I'm gonna kiss ya," Yuki threatened with a thuggish tone, lowering her sunglasses and knitting her brow.

"…?!"

Masachika reflexively grabbed the back of his neck after being reminded about the pain he'd suffered this morning.

"Why the hell are ya covering yer neck?"

"Place a hand on your heart and ask yourself why."

"A hand on my heart…? Oops. I forgot to wear a bra."

"What is wrong with you?!"

"Ha-ha. I'm kidding. Look."

Yuki leaned forward, pulling down the collar of her shirt to show him her bra.

"Don't show me!"

After he waved his hands in a disgusted manner while looking away, Yuki pouted, shrugging, then adjusted her sunglasses and looked to the nearby building to collect herself.

"Oh, is that the haunted house?"

"Sure looks that way. At least, I hope it is with all that blood."

Splattered blood decorated the outer walls of the run-down shack. The atmosphere was perfect for a haunted house…but there was one thing that Yuki didn't seem to care for.

"It looks like something you'd see in some cheap free horror game online."

"How can it be cheap if it's free?"

"…I'll be damned. You're a genius, bro."

"There's nothing 'genius' about that."

He glared back at his sister, who seemed to be bursting with admiration. Ayano was air. Yuki seemed to lose interest in the haunted house after that and turned her attention toward the dome-shaped building in the opposite direction.

"Hey, look. An arcade."

“Oh, cool. I had no idea they had an arcade like this inside the amusement park.”

“I’ve actually never even been to one.”

Intriguing, cheerful electronic noises spilled out, and Yuki’s eyes sparkled with curiosity. Masachika then began to stroke his chin like a scholar.

“An arcade, huh… I haven’t been to one in a while, either, now that I think about it.”

“What? Did you used to go a lot or something?”

“I did when I was living with Grandpa. But, well…I ended up getting banned from most of the ones in the area, so I stopped going.”

“The hell did you do?”

She looked up at him sternly, and his eyes wandered as he retraced his memories.

“Uh… Well, I played all the games that show the high scores at the end until my name was the only name displayed on the screens…”

“The owners obviously thought you were cheating.”

“And I used whatever method necessary to snatch every last prize in the claw machines.”

“You knocked over the pedestals holding the prizes, didn’t you?”

“And once I got all the prizes, I tried to grab some of those glittering stones at the bottom as well.”

“Who wastes their time doing that?”

“And before I knew it, I was banned from every single arcade.”

“Reasonable.”

Masachika shrugged at his sister’s disgusted glare. After all, he’d been somewhat of a delinquent back when he was in elementary school, so being banned from the arcades was par for the course. He would sometimes get into fights, he’d left his asthmatic sister as if she was a nuisance while he moved in with his paternal grandparents, and he’d been depressed. That was why he wasted his days away at the arcade and mastered games he didn’t even like. It was around this time that he put his more passive self behind and began to do things that went against what his mother and her father taught him just to spite them.

*I only started to settle down once I met that girl.*

Suddenly, Yuki grabbed him by the hand and pointed ahead.

“Let’s ride that! You can show us your arcade skills later!”

Just ahead stood a roller coaster with its rails violently curving in every direction and a sign with the words *Biggest Drop in Japan!* in

bold.

"Don't you think we should work our way up to that? I mean, that roller coaster's apparently the most intense attraction they've got here."

"Brooo, don't tell me you're scared?"

"I've never been on a roller coaster, so I don't even know what they're like."

"Don't worry. Neither have I."

"I sometimes wonder where that courage of yours comes from… What about you, Ayano?"

"Lady Yuki's wishes are my own. Wherever she goes, I go."

"Yeah, I figured you'd say that…"

Resigned, he shrugged and prepared himself for the worst as Yuki guided them to the queue for the roller coaster.

"Oh? Yuki, check it out. It says you have to be a hundred forty centimeters tall to ride. Looks like you're out of luck."

"I'm not that small!"

"Hmm? Hey now, stop stretching your back to make yourself look taller."

"I'm not! Look! It's not even debatable! I'm more than tall enough!"

She rushed over to the human-shaped cardboard cutout that said *You must be this tall to ride*, then stood in front of it in a desperate attempt to show she was tall enough. She ended up, in fact, being around a fist taller than the cutout. And yet…

"Yuki, stop standing on your toes," he reprimanded gently.

"I'm not!"

"Ha-ha-ha! Wearing platform shoes with soles that thick is dangerous, you know?"

"They're sneakers!"

"Yeah, yeah. Anyway, come on. Let's go."

"You better walk. You're lucky I didn't smack you."

With a forced smile, Yuki chased after her brother, who had walked on ahead with a soft smile while a couple and their child nearby watched the siblings warmly. They apparently thought that Masachika was Yuki's much older brother. Little did they know that they were actually in the same grade at school and were less than one year apart in age. Incidentally, the couple didn't even notice Ayano… despite the fact that she was standing right behind Yuki. What incredible air she was.

“May I have your attention! Please place your belongings inside the locker here,” a female ride operator announced after they’d moved farther along the line. Hanging above the lockers was a list of illustrations displaying what couldn’t be brought onto the roller coaster.

“Makes sense. They’d have to shut down the entire ride if you dropped something, after all.”

“Hmm… Phone, wallet…”

“Don’t forget your hat and sunglasses.”

“Oh, right.”

After placing their bags and the items they had in their pockets into the lockers, they pulled the locker keys, which had wristbands attached to them, out of the keyholes and put them on.

“Oh, excuse me? Do you think you could undo your ponytail so you can lean your head firmly against your seat?”

“…?!”

Ayano’s shoulders jumped the moment the ride operator spoke to her. She looked at the woman with her eyes so wide that they almost fell out.

“No, Ayano. She doesn’t have a sixth sense, so stop looking at her like, ‘Y-you can see me?!’ You’re not a ghost, you know?” Masachika sighed while Ayano untied her ponytail.

*Well, there goes most of her disguise… Not like it matters, though.*

He thought that as he waited until it was their turn to get on.

“Wow. The very front…”

“Looks like we’re starting at the climax. Heh.”

Masachika tensed when the ride operator guided them to the four seats at the front of the roller coaster. Although Yuki was trying to act excited to hide her nervousness, her rigid facial expression told a different story.

“Enjoy the ride,” the ride operator wished cheerfully before the roller coaster began to move. The cart rattled as it slowly turned, then climbed up the track.

“Oh, neat… What a beautiful sky…”

“Masachika, look. ♪ The swing carousel looks so tiny from up here. ♪”

“…”

They chatted idly, letting their mouths say whatever randomly came to mind whether they meant what they said or not…until the roller coaster finally reached the top, and the head cart stopped right

as it was hanging over the slope down.

"What? Don't stop here—"

The roller coaster instantaneously shot down the steep slope before Masachika could even finish his sentence.

"Whoaaaaaa?!"

"Ahhhhhh?!"

"…"

The siblings' screams were filled with fear and astonishment before they were swept away by the wind. After the nonstop drop to the bottom, the roller coaster then suddenly made a sharp turn.

"Gaaaaaah?!"

"Eeeeeek?!"

"…"

It felt as though their organs were rapidly bouncing around in their bodies, and a lateral gust of wind abruptly smacked their cheeks. But it wasn't long before the siblings' screams gradually transformed into squeals of joy.

"Yaaahoooooo!"

"Yaaaaaay!"

"…"

The two siblings firmly grasped the bar holding their bodies in place, then leaned as far forward as they could to joyfully shout. They were now thoroughly enjoying every bit of this ride. But the excitement didn't last forever. The roller coaster eventually began to slow with a rattle and return to the boarding platform. The siblings looked at each other, excitedly sputtering their thoughts.

"Wow, I had no idea roller coasters were that fun!"

"Right?! I got such an adrenaline rush from that thing! I definitely wouldn't mind doing that again!"

"Same here! But I really doubt we're going to get to ride at the very front again…"

After gushing about it with Yuki, he turned to check in with Ayano.

"What about you, Aya…no…?"

But she continued to face forward with a blank expression without even acknowledging Masachika until…a single tear ran down her right cheek.

"She's crying like a celebrity actress?!"

"I'm so sorry, Ayano! Were you scared?!"

Tears flowed down her cheeks while her expression remained still

as a portrait, making the siblings panic. They tried getting her attention, but she just continued to face forward without moving even an inch. It wasn't long before the roller coaster returned to the platform and the safety bars automatically rose.

"…"

But Ayano didn't stand. Although they didn't notice a moment ago because the roller coaster was still rocking, Ayano was actually trembling. Furthermore, it'd apparently been scary to the point where she couldn't stop shaking, so Masachika ended up essentially carrying her out of her seat. The siblings then each took a shoulder and walked her toward the exit.

"Are you okay?"

"…Yes, I apologize for the inconvenience."

"I had no idea it would be that terrifying for you. I'm really sorry for making you do that."

"You do not have to apologize for my spinelessness."

"I don't think this has anything to do with your spine…"

Masachika sighed at Ayano's overly serious judgment. Once he saw the lockers up ahead, he let her hand go. But when they reached out to grab their belongings…

"Ah."

…a familiar voice could be heard nearby, so Masachika and Yuki reflexively turned around and found, of all people, Nonoa—dressed casually (she had her hair in half-up pigtails) and looking unmotivated, as usual.

"Nonoa? What's wro—?"

And standing next to her…was Sayaka, who was also dressed casually. When she noticed Masachika and Yuki there, she looked stunned. Unfortunately, Yuki's disguise, which had been prepared for a moment just like this, was still stuffed inside her locker.

"Huh…? Yuki and Masachika? Hey…?"

"H-hey."

"Hello… What a coincidence running into you here, Sayaka."

They greeted her back despite feeling shaken by the unexpected encounter. Sayaka may have not said anything to Ayano, but that was perhaps due to her being solely focused on the siblings…or perhaps it was because Ayano had become air again.

"Um…"

Obviously flustered, Sayaka swiftly shifted her gaze toward her surroundings. Maybe it was a gut feeling, but Masachika mysteriously

knew she was looking for something—no, for someone, and the instant he came to that conclusion, he was overcome with a sense of dread and whispered to Yuki:

"Hey?! What are we going to do?!"

"RIP our amusement-park adventure."

"This isn't a joke!"

During their hushed exchange, Sayaka realized that a certain silver-haired maiden was nowhere in sight…and her expression became devoid of all emotion. As she lowered her gaze, a light suddenly reflected off her glasses, hiding her eyes from them while an ominous aura suddenly began to emit from her body. Neither Masachika nor Yuki could immediately move. Ayano was air, naturally.

"…I see," Sayaka muttered, as if she had come to some sort of conclusion, before swiftly lifting her chin. There was a chilling light in her eyes…and it was evident that she was about to have a fit. Nonoa, who was watching out of her peripheral vision, took her lips off her drink's straw.

"Uh-oh," she commented blandly, as though it was not her problem.

◇

The eye-catching group of five sat at one of the round white tables in the amusement park's small food court. The person who stood out the most was the girl with curly bright-blond hair and sharply sculpted features that were uncommon in Japan: Nonoa. She wore a stylish and somewhat revealing outfit, exposing her milky-white skin to the summer sun. One could recognize her high-level beauty in a single glance. The other three women sitting at the table were also beautiful, with very refined features of their own. Well, if you ignored the fact that one of them looked like she was in elementary school, that is. Mixed in with this group of beautiful young women, however, was a single average-looking guy, and any outsider would have a hard time racking their brain to figure out how he fit in with the group.

"Hey, ladies. What's…up…?"

A young man, who appeared to be a university student, approached the group—Nonoa specifically—but when he picked up on the overwhelming aura coming from Sayaka, he gulped. Sayaka had to have noticed he was there, but as though she couldn't be bothered to

acknowledge something so insignificant, she simply continued to glare at Masachika, her eyes filled with scorn and rage. This table alone felt as though it were in a dimension where the heat of summer could not reach. And the stranger's once-friendly smile tensed at the world of chaos he had just walked into.

"…Did you need something?" asked Yuki, speaking on behalf of Nonoa, who completely ignored the guy.

"Huh? Oh, uh…"

Still sporting a tight smile, his eyes wandered until he happened to see Ayano's churros and pointed at them.

"The, uh… Th-those churros sure look good! Ha-ha."

"…They sell them over there. Cinnamon-flavored."

"Oh, really? Thanks," the stranger replied before promptly turning on his heel and rushing off to a group of five guys who seemed to be his friends.

"Oh god. Dude. Duuude."

Masachika could faintly hear his voice in the distance.

*Yeah, I know how you feel…*, he thought while glaring back at Sayaka, who was sitting across the table from him. Of course, he hadn't simply been having a staring contest with Sayaka this entire time. He was also communicating under the table with his sister, who was sitting to his left. They were using each other's palms to write letters and discuss what they were going to do.

*…Okay, let's go with that. I'll leave the talking to you.*

*No way. You do it.*

*Women get emotional when men say stuff like that in these situations, right? Everything will go more smoothly if you talk to her.*

*Leave it to the suspect to pull a selfish testimony out of his ass to save himself.*

*What are you even accusing me of?*

*All I know is that what you said sounded very misogynistic to me.*

*Hey, quit it.*

They continued to bicker over who would talk to Sayaka. Who could blame them, though? It was terrifying, and their reliable maid had been focusing solely on her churros ever since that guy pointed them out. It was like watching a hamster stuff its cheeks full of sunflower seeds.

*Should I be worried that she thinks someone's going to steal her churros?*

To make matters worse, Nonoa—the only person here who could

calm Sayaka—was…

*Seriously? Would it kill her to put her damn phone away for two seconds?*

Their two lifelines were in their own little worlds. It was almost admirable that they were so focused on themselves that nothing could disturb them.

*Sigh… You owe me big for this one, bro.*

*All right. Thanks…even though I think you already owe me way more than I owe you.*

Yuki closed her eyes, as if she figured they would only argue in circles, and let it slide, albeit with a last, resigned glance at her brother. She then undid her pigtails, softly shook her head, and smiled like a proper young lady at Sayaka.

"Sayaka, there appears to be a misunderstanding. The reason Masachika and I are spending time together today is because we wanted to make up after what happened at the closing ceremony. While we may be rivals in the election, we fought at the closing ceremony as if we weren't truly friends, so we decided to spend the day together to clear the air. That's all this is."

"…"

Sayaka's eyebrow twitched during the explanation, then she shifted her now less hostile gaze to Yuki. Nevertheless, her cold expression and the way she slowly adjusted her spectacles didn't give any indication that she was planning on backing off.

"…That's a lie."

"…? Sayaka?"

"You're lying," she asserted in almost a whisper, and Yuki's smile froze. She promptly began to speculate what evidence Sayaka could have to declare such a thing, but she almost immediately came to the conclusion that there was no such evidence, so she decided to play dumb instead.

"What do you mean, Sayaka? What part of that sounded like a lie to—?"

"Then why?!" Sayaka shouted. She jumped to her feet and slammed her hands on the table, leaning extremely close to Yuki. Even Yuki was kind of weirded out, so she almost revealed her true nature as Sayaka got too close for comfort.

"Uh…"

"Why can I smell the same shampoo on you both?"

"…?!"

“And it isn’t only you two. It’s coming from your friend, Ayano Kimishima, as well!”

Sayaka shot an accusatory glare at Ayano. Ayano’s shoulders jumped, and she suddenly began to eat her churros even more quickly.

“And that shirt!”

“…! Huh?”

Sayaka swiveled back to Yuki and resettled her glasses, staring at the anime merch T-shirt Yuki wore.

“That’s a limited-edition *K-OFF* T-shirt they were selling three years ago when the show was on air, isn’t it? And that is the Kanamin-ending version, which was the most popular one. Therefore, I find it hard to believe that you, someone who isn’t a nerd, somehow ended up buying that shirt by sheer coincidence, even though it wasn’t sold in any clothing stores or at any online auctions. Let’s imagine you did purchase it three years ago for argument’s sake. There is no way it would have fit you back then, and yet it appears to have been worn quite a bit!” she vehemently argued as if she didn’t need a moment to breathe. Sayaka then leaned back before simultaneously glaring at both Masachika and Yuki.

“That shirt used to be Masachika Kuze’s! And he gave it to you after he got too big to wear it himself!”

…What brilliant powers of deduction. Neither Masachika nor Yuki could immediately reply. They didn’t even have the fight in them to say, “How the hell do you know all that about *K-OFF* (Official Title: *K-Off, Winter Won’t Come to the Music Club*)?”

“And…?”

Sayaka dropped back down into her seat like a real Sherlock and quietly replied:

“You are wearing his old clothing, your hair smells just like his, and now you’re together at an amusement park?”

Contrary to only a few moments ago, her tone was now calm, and her expression was that of a member in the school’s disciplinary department.

“I would have expected to see Alisa Kujou with you as well if you really were simply trying to ‘make up.’ And yet here you three are, having so much fun without her. What is going on? You had me…help you, and this is what you do? Was the entire closing ceremony nothing more than a charade? And now I smell the same shampoo coming from you all. Perhaps an illicit sexual relationship? I bet the school newspaper club would love to sink their teeth into a scandal like this.”

Her accusation made Masachika pause. There was nothing special about Ayano and Yuki staying at his house to him, but it was clear not everyone shared that sentiment. *It makes sense*, he thought. Although they may all be childhood friends, having two rivals of the opposite sex stay at his house made it seem like he was secretly communicating with the enemy. If one was to maliciously interpret what was going on, they might see Masachika as some mastermind behind the scenes who was deceiving Alisa, Yuki, and Ayano in order to influence the election.

*"Running Mate Betrays Beautiful Transfer Student to Play All Night with Sexy Rivals." Yep, that'd be the headline. I should have been more cautious. What was I thinking? Maybe wearing a disguise wasn't that stupid of an idea, after all?*

He regretted his carelessness as he pondered how he was going to dig his way out of this mess. He believed Sayaka wasn't the kind of person who would blab about their affairs to strangers, but it was likely she'd tell Alisa about what she saw, since this seemed to be directly related to his running mate. And that…would be quite a headache to sort out later. Eliminating Sayaka's doubts would most likely solve a lot of problems, regardless.

*The question is…what should I do?*

He could make excuses for each and every one of Sayaka's accusations, but that surely wouldn't clear her suspicions entirely. Furthermore, there was so much evidence stacked against him that it would only be natural for Sayaka to expect him to start coming out of the gate with every excuse he could think of to conceal the truth.

*What should I do? What would be the optimal solution?*

The gears in his head were spinning at full speed—though he maintained a poker face—when suddenly, Nonoa, whom he had completely forgotten about, spoke up while continuing to mess around on her phone.

"Saya, I totally don't think it's that important."

"…?"

Sayaka slowly looked toward her childhood friend. Masachika and Yuki focused on what she was going to say next, believing she might help pull them out of this mess, but Nonoa casually commented:

"They're siblings."

It was like time froze in Masachika's and Yuki's world for a split second before their minds began to wildly speculate, as if their brains had been restarted.

*How does she know that?! That's—! No, that's not what I should be worried about right now! What we need to do now is play dumb!*

The siblings instantaneously came to that conclusion before promptly moving into action.

"Huh?"

"Um? Nonoa? What are you talking about?"

Masachika appeared skeptical, while Yuki tilted her head and looked bothered. Those were the most natural reactions they could make whenever something as outlandish as this was said. Nonoa, unfortunately, wasn't even watching their outstanding performance, though.

"I'm guessing by that look on your face that I'm right."

But Nonoa wasn't looking at Masachika or Yuki.

*Ayano?!*

The moment they realized this, the siblings swiftly turned to Ayano, who was folding the paper cone the churros had come in while blinking in wonder. All thought ceased.

"Ha-ha! Now that's the reaction I wanted to see. I knew it."

The sound of Nonoa's joyful voice tickled the siblings' ears as they froze, instantly recognizing their blunder. The way they'd turned around to look at Ayano was clearly an overreaction.

"Huh? Siblings…? Huh? Brother and sister?!" Sayaka shouted in utter confusion.

"Like, isn't it obvious? Just look at them. They look exactly alike," Nonoa replied in her usual carefree manner. Nevertheless, Masachika was still desperately trying to think of a way out of this…when Nonoa put the final nail in the coffin and added:

"I legit hate to do this to you 'cause I can see you still trying to think of excuses, but we met before a long time ago, *Masachika Suou*."

"…!"

Masachika's eyes widened as she indifferently laid out the facts… and that was when he knew it was over. After sighing deeply and slumping, he glanced over at Yuki, who shrugged back at him.

"…Where did we meet?" he asked, facing Nonoa once more.

"At a piano recital. Wow. Did you seriously forget? I legit even gave you a bouquet of flowers once."

"…Seriously?"

He scratched his head at the unexpected connection as he traced his memories, but he couldn't remember a thing, since he'd sealed his memories of the Suou household. He vaguely remembered maybe

meeting a blond, slightly Western-looking girl at a piano recital a long time ago…or maybe it was a false memory he just made up in his mind right now? …That was the extent of how much he remembered.

“Kuze, just in case you aren’t aware, almost every kid who took piano lessons in the neighborhood back then knew who you were.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Yooo. You were in second grade flawlessly playing Chopin. Of course you’re gonna stand out.”

“…Oh.”

He didn't have any strong feelings about it because it had been years since he had quit playing piano, and he didn't care what anyone thought about him when he was a kid.

"In other words, you knew that my last name was Suou back then, and you had a hunch that we might be siblings, so you tricked us into admitting it."

"Well, you could have been cousins or something, too, but you totally have the same eyes, so I figured you were probably siblings."

"…If you knew all this time, why didn't you ever say anything before?" questioned Masachika.

"Because I didn't care," Nonoa indifferently replied as she started fidgeting with her phone once more. It was an answer entirely in character for her.

"…All right, then," Masachika said with a bitter snort. That was when Sayaka, who had just been watching, suddenly spoke up from her astonished daze:

"Huh… Huh? R-really? Are you two really siblings?"

"…Yep."

"…Yes, we are."

They decided there was no use denying it anymore and admitted it.

"But you have different last names… Does that mean you were separated at birth? Like long-lost siblings…?" asked Sayaka, staring at both of them.

"Uh… That makes it sound like a way bigger deal than it really is, but, well…I guess?" he replied, slightly tilting his head to the side.

"I—I…"

Sayaka was having a hard time getting a word out as though she was in shock. She covered her mouth, and…tears began to stream down her cheeks.

"S-Sayaka?!"

Masachika jumped, startled by her abrupt tears.

*Wh-what the…? Does she think we're some kind of tragic siblings who were forced apart? Like we aren't even allowed to admit we're siblings? How bad does she think our circumstances are? I mean, our family life might not be ideal, but it isn't tragic enough to cry about…*

Sayaka's tears continued to flow in front of the flustered teenage boy. Her throat trembled as if she was struggling to speak through the tightness caused by tears and a sore heart.

“Th-this…is…! Yesssss!”

“Sayaka?”

“I can ship that!”

“Is it safe to assume you are a woman of culture, Sayaka?” asked Yuki, leaning forward toward her schoolmate who’d been moved to tears. The moment Sayaka saw her eyes—the undeniable eyes of a fellow closet nerd—she knew. She knew that Yuki was a gentlewoman who shared the same interests as her.

“…! Yes!” she excitedly admitted, grasping Yuki’s hands. It was at this moment that a strong bond was born between them. There was absolutely no logic behind it, but you couldn’t be a nerd moved by the phrase *long-lost siblings* and be a bad person!

“…The hell?” Masachika apathetically muttered when he saw this sudden twist. However, they were already in their own little world as they passionately discussed the long-lost sibling trope.

“So…what do you want to do about this?”

Masachika shifted his gaze toward Nonoa as a plea for help, because there was clearly no room for any of them in Yuki’s and Sayaka’s conversation.

“Uh…,” she muttered, her eyes wandering before looking back at him. “Wanna go check out the other rides together?”

“What? Why?”

But after giving it a second thought, he figured, *Wait. Why not?* After all, he was well aware how long nerds could discuss their passions. Checking out the amusement park with someone in the same position as him would be a far better use of his time, rather than simply sitting there waiting for them to finish.

“What about you, Ayano?”

“Me?”

When he looked to his right, Ayano quickly looked back at him as if she was a bit flustered.

“…?”

He followed the direction her gaze had been locked on only a few moments before…and saw the churro stand. He immediately knew what she was thinking. *Going for round two, huh?* he thought.

“Oh, uh… I’m guessing you’re going to wait here with Yuki?”

“Y-yes… I am here to serve her, after all.”

“…All right.”

*Just how much of a churro addict is this girl? But, well…I guess it’s not every day you can eat them, so I get it*, Masachika thought while he

stood. Today was a special day, so he decided to overlook the fact that she still hadn't even had lunch yet.

"Hey, uh… We'll be back soon."

"*Giggle.* So you call her *Nono* when it's just the two of you?"

"Th-that's… I…"

"Oh my. There is nothing to be embarrassed about."

"Yep, they're not listening at all. No surprise there." He softly sighed at Yuki and Sayaka, who were still absorbed in their own world, before shifting his attention to Nonoa.

"Anyway, ready to go?"

"No doubt." She nodded, stuffed her phone into her pocket, and stood. After that, they spent the entire morning checking out rides. They'd been brought together for some strange reason, and they made a bizarre pair, but it was actually a lot of fun. Perhaps it had something to do with Nonoa's magnetism. Whatever the case, they spent nearly an hour together before returning to the food court for lunch. However…

"But it's like the canon lore is purposely making sure that I can't ship them! Every single time! Do you know how that feels?!"

"Y-yes…that usually does happen when you try to ship childhood friends…"

"What's so great about people who you hardly know?! Like when a transfer student suddenly comes out of nowhere or a new classmate?! A childhood friend, who has been by the main character's side their entire life, is way better than that! They deserve to be happy!"

"Ha…ha-ha…"

Sitting at the table were Sayaka—who was fervently explaining why childhood friends made the best love interests—and a slightly weirded-out Yuki. Ayano was also sitting at the table, eating another churro (probably her sixth one, judging by how many paper cones were scattered about on the table) as if their conversation was of no concern to her. It was chaos. Masachika looked off into the distance as he asked Nonoa:

"Hey, Nonoa?"

"Hmm?"

"Was Sayaka shipping Yuki and me?"

"Probably."

"…Wow."

Masachika gazed up toward the sky. It all finally made sense to him. The reason Sayaka was so angry back when they were preparing

for the debate…was perhaps because reality didn't match her imagination. Shipping is serious business in the world of anime nerds, after all.

*Otaku are so annoying.*

But the instant he inwardly complained, Yuki suddenly lifted her head and commented:

"Like you have any right to say that, my dear brother."

"Stop reading my mind."

"Mmm…! Y-your 'dear brother'? Ah…"

Sayaka covered her nose and mouth as if she was trying to hold something back.

"…You really are a nerd, huh?"

But Masachika only felt utter disappointment…and maybe a little empathy. Otherwise, he wasn't really sure what to call that feeling.

CHAPTER 3

# Wait. Seriously?

The sounds of textbook pages being flipped and pens gliding across paper could be heard in the air-conditioned room. Once again, Masachika was working on summer homework with Alisa in his living room. He was home alone with a girl of unparalleled beauty. Although any ordinary boy in puberty would be imagining all sorts of scenarios, this was their fourth study session together, so the novelty had already worn off, and he was able to focus on his studies…or at least, he wished that was how he felt right now. Every time Alisa came over, she became quieter, and the pressure was gradually becoming unbearable. Pressure to do what, one might wonder? Put simply, it felt as if Alisa were saying, "Are we really just going to study every time we do this?"

Even now, he felt strangely pressured as she silently scribbled away, seeming composed. Honestly, since the first day she came over, he felt she was dressed a little *too nice* just to do homework. Be that as it may, women often dressed up for themselves to feel good and not for others, so it would perhaps be egotistical, to put it lightly, to immediately think she was dressing up for him. And that was why Masachika didn't mention her appearance once. But today—today, she was wearing a little makeup, making her already otherworldly beauty stand out even more. Her good looks were intimidating in a way, and there was no way Masachika could ignore the signs anymore.

*She is obviously dressing up for some reason…even though we're only*

*doing our summer homework…*

Despite being used to looking Alisa in the eyes by now, when he saw her…armed to the teeth like this, it captivated him. Perhaps the word *captivated* didn't do his feelings justice, though. He was genuinely grateful to see something so pleasing to the eye. Just staring at her brought him joy. He was essentially worshipping her.

"…What?"

Alisa picked up on his gaze and suddenly lifted her head in curiosity.

"Nothing… I was just noticing your makeup, since it's not often I see you wearing any."

"Oh…yes, I put on a little this morning, I suppose?"

"Well, you look— Uh… You look even more beautiful today than usual," he complimented, albeit a little awkwardly.

"…Thanks," she stoically replied as if she was used to people telling her that. However, the tense air from earlier seemed to somewhat dissipate, and her faintly curling lips showed that his comment did make her happy, despite how it may have appeared. But the instant Masachika bashfully looked down at his notebook, Alisa's lips tightened again. She glared at the top of his head with clear discontent, fidgeting with the brand-new ribbon tied in her hair while she whispered in Russian:

"**<**Then invite me to go out somewhere already.**>**"

"…You say something?"

"I just said you lost a point for taking so long to compliment me. That's all."

"Well, excuuuse me. You were just sooo beautiful that I was at a loss for words."

"Oh, come on. I simply got a little dressed up. Nothing more."

*You can't seriously be saying that*, thought Masachika as he coldheartedly glared at her for having the audacity to say such a thing. Alisa never wore makeup. It was always as if she was saying, "What? Makeup's against school rules? I don't care. I don't even wear makeup." But not today. Although it wasn't much, she still did her makeup today, so to call that getting a "little dressed up" like it wasn't a big deal was absurd.

Alisa averted her eyes from Masachika's skeptical gaze and added:

"I was… I was practicing a little. People in the real world would make fun of me for not knowing how to do my makeup, so I figured I would give it a try whenever I had some extra time on my hands…"

“Huh. Is that so?”

“…Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Just enjoying my eye candy. You look so beautiful, no matter what angle I admire you from. I could admire you all day,” he replied in a monotone voice, still impassive. After the corner of Alisa’s eye twitched, her face suddenly glowed as if she’d been struck with an idea that made her smile.

“**<**Are you sure you’re fine with just looking?**>**”

Her eyes were inviting and her voice teasing. Masachika stiffened at the sudden seductive whisper in Russian.

“…What was that?”

“I was simply wondering if you even knew what good makeup looked like.” She snorted in a belittling way, crossing her arms while leaning back in her chair.

“**<**Come on now, you can touch if you’d like, you know?**>**”

*…Touch what?*

Masachika was genuinely curious as the jiggling ripe melons reasserted their presence over her arms. His eyes locked onto Alisa’s; he felt somewhat annoyed by her cocky smile, which curled with a sense of superiority as if to say, “Heh! You have no idea what I’m saying!”

*You little punk… I wonder how she’d like it if I said, “**<**Don’t mind if I do!**>** ” before squeezing the ever-loving life out of her boobs.*

He imagined the look on her face if he actually followed through. It was a deeply interesting idea, and it was definitely something he’d love to try if he could save beforehand and then reload his file. However, it was pretty obvious the option would lead to a game-over screen, and he valued his life, so he decided to stick to merely imagining her reaction.

Unaware of Masachika's gentlemanly (?) thoughts, Alisa brushed her hair back over her shoulder with her right hand while suggestively adding:

"**<**You can do whatever you want to me today.**>**"

*Hooray. ♪ I can squeeze the ever-loving life out of them. ♪*

After receiving permission in Russian, Masachika opened his hands before immediately diving right into her cleavage…in his imagination, but in the real world, he simply looked away, turning his gaze toward the world outside the window.

*I bet she's thinking, "You had the chance of a lifetime, and you didn't even know it, dummy. How pathetic." Well, guess what? I did know, and I'm being a gentleman pretending not to understand! You're the dummy here! You should be thanking me!*

He continued to have imaginary arguments in his head, acting like he didn't notice Alisa gleefully smirking at him with a slight blush. He sounded like a sore loser but even more pathetic. That was when Alisa suddenly sighed and came in with a follow-up attack.

"Time's up. You lose."

"…I lose what?"

When he glanced in her direction, she smirked back in a condescending manner, as if he was some sort of simpleton.

"You just missed the chance of a lifetime."

"Excuse me?"

"I feel bad for you. You used up all your luck for the month."

"What are you even talking about?"

"You would know if you understood women a little better." Alisa snorted with an eyebrow raised. She was acting like some sort of sophisticated older woman who was teasing a young, inexperienced boy. Her arrogant gaze was dripping with a sense of superiority. Even Masachika was starting to get annoyed.

*Excuse me?! "You would know if you understood women a little better. Derp." You don't need to understand women to get what she's saying! You need to understand Russian! Using a language barrier to protect yourself while you make fun of me… So you like to pretend you're a dirty girl, huh?! Well, let's see if you can keep that arrogant smirk on your face when I push you down onto the bed.*

"Do it! Dooo it!" encouraged the little-devil Yuki on his shoulder while the little-angel Maria on his other shoulder tried to stop him.

"You mustn't do such a thing to Alya!" she cried, helping (?)

Masachika suppress his savage instincts.

"O-oh? That's rich coming from someone who seems to know absolutely nothing about men," he exclaimed, face tense.

"…Go on."

"You came into the house of a man who essentially lives alone. That's pretty naive if you ask me." He laughed condescendingly, albeit with a sense that he was digging himself into a hole. Alisa's eyebrows raised, and she lifted her chin with a provocative smirk.

"Oh, it is, huh? Prove it."

She was clearly trying to provoke him as if she was laughing to herself and saying, "You don't have the guts to even touch me," which made Masachika sneer.

*Heh… Heh-heh-heh… She's clearly underestimating me. Looks like it's time to switch gears into cool-guy mode! I didn't watch all that dating sim–inspired anime for nothing!*

There was no way he could back down now after being incited this much. He inwardly howled like a wolf, slowly stood to his feet, and slid around the table to sit next to Alisa. When she looked up at him, her arms still crossed, he prepared himself to gesture with his chin that they should go to his room. It was a badass move that all the cool guys on TV did, but…

*Hold on… Alya has a huge ego. Surely, she hates overconfident guys like this. I should probably stick with something a little milder…*

He suddenly changed his mind only moments before performing the act. Nevertheless, his right hand was already reaching out, almost touching Alisa's cheek. There was no going back now, but if he wasn't going to gesture with his chin anymore, what was he going to use this hand for?

"…"

And after he hesitated as long as he could, he promptly slipped his hand under Alisa's hair, placing it over her ear while he smirked and exclaimed:

"I'll be in my room waiting."

He then let out a smug chuckle, turned around, and stepped inside his room before closing the door, where he confidently grinned as if to say, "I showed her!"

*That ended up being even worse than gesturing to my room with my chin!! Ahhh!!*

He collapsed to the floor, covering his face with both hands. He crawled over to the bed and buried his face in his blanket to yell

bizarre noises into the abyss.

*"I'll be in my room waiting"?! What the hell is wrong with me?! That's something you say to someone when they're getting up to go somewhere else! Like to take a shower or something! Who the hell randomly says that to someone at the table, then leaves them there?!*

He was creating an entire cringe compilation in real time that he would undoubtedly recall in the shower for years to come. He writhed and squeezed the life out of his summer blanket. His joints popped as he flexed every muscle in his body…and then he went limp.

*Ngh… Well, I guess this could be a good thing depending on how you look at it. After another minute goes by, I can just run out of the room and yell, "Why didn't you come?!" and make it look like a joke. Then we could go back to doing our homework like nothing happened.*

Masachika used the power of optimism to console himself…when he suddenly heard a hesitant knock at the door.

"…?!"

His face, buried in the mattress, popped up in shock, but after rushing to take a seat on the edge of the bed, he nonchalantly replied:

"Yes?"

The door then slowly opened, revealing Alisa, who was looking down and seemed a bit serious.

*She actually came?! Why?!*

Masachika tensed at the completely unexpected turn of events, but Alisa didn't seem to notice. She crossed her left arm over her chest and used her right hand to play with her hair. She was avoiding eye contact, and her expression said, "Well, I suppose I can give you a passing grade for your pickup line. Anyway, here I am. You're welcome." She was still acting as though she were this perfect, innocent woman who'd relit the competitive fire in Masachika's heart. *If that's how you want to do this, then let's do it*, he thought. With every fiber of his being, he relaxed his expression, then grinned smugly and patted the space next to him on the bed, sweetly calling her over.

"Come. Sit me with me."

*Kill meeeeee!*

And he was immediately filled with regret. Doing something only cool guys could pull off pushed his embarrassment past the breaking point, and he wanted to die. His expression had frozen over, and he was mentally writhing in pain.

"…Hmph." Alisa coldheartedly snorted as she…

*She sat down! Why?! Whyyyy?!*

She sat down slowly, then casually recrossed her arms and continued to fidget with her hair as she looked the other way.

*This is the part where you're supposed to get disgusted and leave! Then I crack a stupid joke, and everything's back to normal again! Are you sure you're okay with this?! I'm not going to even mention what this is, but are you sure you're okay?!*

They sat alone in his room on his bed. It was just the two of them. There was only one outcome to this situation that Masachika could come up with.

*Wh-wh-wh-what should I do?! Should I say some sort of stupid joke and ruin the mood?! No, she'll think I'm a coward if I do that now! She'll think I'm some ball-less, no-good loser!*

Which he most definitely was, regardless of what anyone else thought. He had neither the courage to push her down onto the bed nor the guts to take the initiative with a woman he'd brought to his room. But admitting that meant admitting defeat, and he was not going to have that.

*But if I back down now…*

He imagined Alisa's smug, condescending smirk. "Oh? I thought you were going to teach me how men work? Do men usually chicken out like this?" Despite knowing he created the entire situation in his head, it still pissed him off. He could understand if it really was an older, more experienced woman speaking, but…

*You have no right saying something like that! You've never even had a boyfriend before! You hardly even have friends!*

Masachika took another step toward the motivating force in his heart: his rebellious spirit, which was burning brighter than ever. He repositioned his hips to get closer to Alisa—their legs were almost touching. While she continued to look away, he whispered into her ear:

"Are you nervous? That's so adorable."

*Somebody, kill me! Please!!*

He imagined himself leaning back as far as he could, covering his face in shame over creating a new record for most consecutive cringey moments in a single day. He was set up to fail, no matter what he did. It was a living hell.

*Yuki! Ayano! I wouldn't even mind having Dad come rescue me now! I'll take anyone! Just save me! Family members usually walk in during scenes like this anyway!*

The hope that some anime cliché would bail him out was

profound, but nothing that convenient (inconvenient?) would ever happen in real life. Whatever the case, nobody ever came to save him in the end. Alisa swiftly looked back at him with a sidelong glance. Her face froze for a split second, but she immediately forced her lips to provocatively curve in an attempt to hide it.

"Me? Nervous? Not at all. If anything, you're the one who seems nervous," she insisted, lifting her chin into the air…before lying back onto the bed herself.

"Come on. You're going to teach me how men work, right?"

She stayed on her side with her body slightly curled, her cheeks faintly blushing. Her unnaturally tense shoulders only further proved she was out of her element and trying way too hard.

*Seriously?! Stop pretending to be tough! You're giving me no other option except to throw myself on top of you! On. Top. Of. You!*

The situation had turned into a game of chicken. Whoever hit the brakes first, lost.

*Ahhh! I'll even take a summoning circle to a parallel world now! People of the new world, I have a female hero for you here! Hmm? Hold on. Wouldn't I get summoned, too, and become a summoner if I keep sitting here? Whatever! I'll take anything! Aliens, invaders from other dimensions —anything! Just get me out of this mess!!*

Perhaps the universe had heard his calls, because Alisa suddenly moved as if she had noticed something. She reached for the summer blanket on top of the bed…and her expression cooled.

"…Masachika."

"Hmm?"

Out of nowhere, her voice was distant and lower than earlier, which actually made Masachika feel a little relieved although confused. She then slowly sat up on the bed, unconcerned with his reaction…and held out something she was holding in her right hand.

"What's this?"

It was a single, looong strand of black hair.

*O-oh, that?*

He thought back to the previous day when he'd wrapped Yuki up in the summer blanket and finally realized what was going on. *Yuki found a hair in my room and had the exact same reaction! Ha-ha-ha!* he thought, if only as a means to escape reality for a brief moment. However, that was also when he suddenly realized that *this* was the moment he had been waiting for. This was the dynamite he would use to blow himself out of this living hell. All he had to do now was light

the fuse, and he could annihilate this game of chicken, which was about to give him a heart attack. Therefore, he overdramatically brushed back his bangs and replied:

"Hmm? Ah, that must be Yuki's. She came over yesterday, and we wrestled on the bed."

"…Oh, okay."

When Masachika lit the fuse with that slap-worthy, scumbag remark, Alisa swiftly reached out to grab his collar with an almost spine-chilling smirk.

*She's going for my neck—!*

But it was already too late. She had grabbed him by the collar and pulled him…but not forward. Onto his side. She traced his exposed nape with her long snow-white fingers.

"Ah…" He instinctively made a soft grunt as a chill ran down his spine. The embarrassment gave him the urge to look away…but he couldn't take his eyes off her. Her terrifying yet seductive smile was both alarming and extremely charming. His breath caught in his throat. She looked more mature because of her makeup, and her beauty wouldn't allow him to avert his gaze. Perhaps it was similar to the scent of danger coming from an enchanting witch. It was a path that clearly led to demise and yet it was impossible to ignore, for at the end of the path was the allure of a real woman.

*Eek! It's a mature woman…*

Masachika was swallowed by this unknown side of his classmate, whom he'd thought had only been faking it all until now. He couldn't resist and simply froze as her finger continued to run down the nape of his neck.

"Then…"

Her faintly crimson lips curled into a dark smile.

"…what is this bite mark?"

"…Huh?"

Those words knocked him back to reality. He returned to his senses and ruminated on that question…while cold sweat suddenly began to drip down his spine.

*Ahhhhhh! I had no idea that was still there!!*

He started to relive the pain from Yuki biting him the previous morning, simultaneously imagining a devilish Yuki sinisterly cackling at him. Not only did he feel like a cheater, but he also looked like one who'd been caught in bed with a hickey on his neck. It wasn't that far from the truth, either.

*Crap, crap, crap, crap! What should I do?!*

His survival instincts frantically raised the alarm: The Armageddon was near, and it was going to be far worse than he could have ever imagined. Having Alisa's fingers tracing his nape was strangely eerie, reminding him how easily a strike to the neck could be fatal. He desperately racked his brain for an excuse, but coming up with one for a bite mark wasn't easy. Perhaps he could have softened the blow if he admitted that Yuki was his little sister, but that option wasn't on the table. He had actually considered telling Alisa ever since Sayaka and Nonoa learned they were siblings the other day, since she was close friends with both him and his sister, but he'd been told not to…by his sister, Yuki, of all people.

*"Being told secrets is a burden to the person you're telling as well."*

*"…A 'burden'?"*

Masachika had been puzzled by his sister's unexpected choice of words.

*"Telling her might take a load off your shoulders, but by doing so, you'd be forcing Alya to keep a secret of yours. She'd even have to hide it from Masha—her own sister. Besides, how do you think she's going to feel going up against me during the election after learning that we're siblings? Do you know for certain that it wouldn't hinder her performance?"* Yuki had explained with a serious expression.

*"…!"*

He'd been taken aback by her reasoning because she'd made a fair point.

*"Yeah…you're right. Secrets are a burden to others as well… Huh,"* he'd replied, impressed, while nodding a few times.

*"Yeah, I remember reading it in some manga a while back,"* she'd added with a dead-serious expression.

*"Way to ruin the moment, Yuki."*

And it was that exchange that'd led him to the conclusion that he should continue keeping his relationship with Yuki a secret. Until the end of the election, at the very least. With that being said, he still couldn't come up with a good excuse to get himself out of this situation, and he was beginning to panic due to the impending sense of danger.

"O-oh, this? Yuki was losing our wrestling match, so she bit me. What a cheater, huh? A sore loser is what she is, huh?"

He couldn't even think of a good excuse in the end and just went with a story consistent with the other story he'd made up.

“Uh-huh…”

There was an ominous tone to her voice, so he glanced over to see how she was reacting…when he saw a bone-chilling smile curling her lips. Her fingers slowly left Masachika’s neck and curled into a fist.

“Hey…do you know what I’m thinking right now?”

…He hadn’t been able to disarm the bomb, it would seem, and the instant he realized this, he decided to be dramatic.

“Heh! Of course, I know what you’re thinking right now. I’m a gentleman. I understand women.” He smirked aloofly before lying back on the bed, smiling up at Alisa as if he were an angel.

“Be gentle, okay?”

It was heaven. He wouldn’t know if she was gentle…because he wouldn’t remember a thing.

“Ready?”

“Yeeeah, girl. Teach me a thing or two about how women think, yooo.”

By the time he came to his senses, they had put a pause on their study session and were outside his apartment. When he checked his phone, it was already 3:20…which meant twenty minutes of his life were missing from his memory. In addition, they were in the hallway outside his apartment, and he was trying to act out what he imagined cool kids talked like.

“…Why are you speaking that way?”

“I have no idea…homie.”

He didn’t know what was going on, but for some reason, whenever he looked at Alisa, his back naturally straightened. It was clear that something had been instilled into him during the missing twenty minutes of his life. Perhaps you could call it brainwashing, even.

“Well, stop. It’s annoying.”

“Word— Ahem. Yes, ma’am.”

After she shot him another glare, he slapped his cheek to knock some sense back into himself and returned to normal. He pondered the situation once more…and concluded that Alisa had invited him on a date to “learn more about how women worked.”

“…”

He wanted to comment on the absurdity of it all once he came to his senses, but there was nothing he could do about it now, since they had already left the house. Therefore, he reverently bowed his head and obediently followed the princess’s orders.

“So? What would you like for me to do for you today, my dear

madam?" he asked as if he were her butler. Alisa's expression twitched in a somewhat annoyed manner at his poor acting, and she coldly demanded:

"First, you're going to walk me to our destination."

"…Your wish is my command."

He offered her his arm, and she awkwardly entwined hers with his…then frowned.

"Wow. That look on your face says it all. 'Mmm… This isn't it.' Well, excuuuse me."

"I—I have no idea what you're talking about!"

"…If you say so. Anyway, it's pretty hot today, so we probably shouldn't be doing this, regardless."

Sharing each other's body heat only made the summer heat worse, so Masachika swiftly pulled her arm off his.

*Alya's not the kind of person who'd enjoy a man walking her somewhere like this anyway*, he thought before glancing at her out of the corner of his eye and noticing she seemed somewhat discontent.

"So…where do you want to go?"

"Isn't that your job to decide?"

"Huh? But…didn't you have a specific idea? Isn't that why you wanted to go out together?"

"No. I told you we needed to go on a dat—on an excursion somewhere so you could learn how women worked."

"…In other words, you're asking me to guess what you'd like?"

"For the most part, yes."

After brushing back her lustrous hair, she puffed out her chest a bit and continued with a smug look on her face:

"Listen. You don't have to get every answer exactly right. All you need to do is your best to make sure the person you're with is thrilled and has fun. That's what makes women happy."

"Interesting. Are you sure you didn't learn that from a manga, though?"

"N-no! Of course not…"

The instant he pointed out that she may simply be parroting something she saw in a manga, her voice trailed off, and her eyes began to wander. Masachika rolled his eyes at her—she couldn't be any more obvious—but he decided to drop it and started to head toward the elevator.

"Ready to go wherever the wind takes us?"

"Hey, what do you mean, 'wherever the wind takes us'?"

“It’s just a figure of speech. Don’t worry. I already have a place in mind.”

“R-really? Good…”

Alisa quietly backed off because of how confident and serious his reply was, but his “place in mind” was…

*I guess we can take a walk around the station and just check out any shops Alya seems interested in. Top all that off with a trip to the local sweets shop at the end, and we’re good.*

And yet he really was going to go wherever the wind took them. He was playing things by ear, but tone-deaf. However, the moment he began walking, he started to get a bad feeling in his gut because…

*People are staring… Everyone’s staring at us…*

Alisa was completely oblivious to her surroundings. They were chatting on the way to the station, but Alisa’s eyes only traveled between the path in front of her and Masachika. Not once did her eyes drift to anyone else.

*Wow! Alya really looks people in the eye when she talks to them! What a polite young lady!*

He thought that as an escape from reality while Alisa steadily looked him in the eye.

“**<**…Maybe I should give you an even bigger one.**>**”

Masachika curiously wondered what her abrupt Russian whispers meant, but he genuinely couldn’t figure it out, so his eyes naturally shifted in her direction.

“What was that?”

“…That looks like it hurt,” she mumbled as she peeked at his neck, which was exposed behind his collar. It finally hit him. He finally figured out why Alisa had been staring at him for so long.

*O-ohhh! She wasn’t looking me in the eye! She was looking at the bite mark on my neck! Am I presumptuous or what?!*

Utter embarrassment set his cheeks ablaze for ever thinking she’d been gawking at him.

*Ahhhhhh! So that’s what she was staring at… Hmm? Then what did she mean by “an even bigger one”?*

He pondered what it could mean…and was instantly overcome with incredible mortification, entirely unlike what he’d been feeling seconds ago. He swiftly looked away from Alisa, unable to maintain eye contact any longer, and idly peered into the shop window behind her.

*Arrrgh! Seriously?! I honestly want to know the emotions she’s feeling*

*when she says stuff like that! Is it kind of like when kids used to write the name of the person they liked on their eraser at school? From what I remember, the person you like would magically fall in love with you, too, if nobody ever found said person's name on your eraser. Regardless, I'm sure she enjoys the thrill of maybe getting caught more than anything. I even remember kids who purposely dropped their eraser after writing the name of someone they didn't even like… Wait.*

"Whoa?!"

While he was staring into the show window in a pathetic attempt to avoid eye contact with Alisa…he suddenly saw a familiar face and leaned back in astonishment.

"What is she—…?! Nonoa?!" Alisa shouted in surprise as well after looking over and following his gaze. On the wall far past the show-window mannequins was a poster of Nonoa mixed in with other Western models. Naturally, the pair stopped in their tracks and stared at their schoolmate who was boldly displayed on the main street.

"Wh-whoa… It's like she's from a completely different dimension compared with your average model…"

"Now that you mention it, I remember hearing she did modeling for her parent's company."

"Same, but it didn't seem real until I saw this poster. I feel like I know someone famous now."

She was dressed stylishly and was giving the camera a mysterious sidelong gaze. She looked phenomenal even when up against professional models. If anything, you would think she was a professional model if you didn't know the truth. Masachika gazed in admiration until someone suddenly pinched his cheek.

"…Yeth?"

"Masachika? Do you know why you're being pinched right now?"

He looked at his companion, only to be met with a reprimanding gaze. It was this question that reminded him he was on a date to learn more about women. *Oops*, he thought as he placed a hand on his pinched cheek and replied:

"…Because I'm looking at another woman while I'm on a date with you."

"Exactly. You would have lost a lot of points if this was a real date. But it isn't, and I don't really care that much."

Alisa swiftly turned and started walking ahead, so Masachika immediately caught up to her, rubbing his throbbing cheek.

*Is it me…or did she pinch me pretty damn hard for someone who didn't*

*care…?*

Even now, he felt like he was being watched—observed like never before. But perhaps this was nothing more than his imagination as well.

"**<**Why won't you look at me?**>**"

*Huh, I guess it's not just my imagination.*

"**<**Whatever happened to being able to admire me all day?**>**"

*Yep, she's mad… She's furious…*

In his mind, Masachika began to sweat anxiously, while Alisa only continued to mutter complaints in Russian and fidget with her hair. Why wouldn't he look at her? Because he didn't have the courage to look her in the eye. After all, what could be scarier than a beautiful woman who was clearly angry?

"Hey, uh… I know this is going to sound like an excuse, but I wasn't staring because I was captivated by her or anything. I was just a little impressed to see her on a poster…"

"Why are you telling me that? I don't care. It's only natural to be drawn to beautiful women. You are a 'man,' after all."

"Yeah, I guess. That'd explain why I can't take my eyes off you sometimes as well."

"Wh-what is wrong with you?"

Having her sarcastic remark hit back with a dead-serious reply made her instantly look away out of embarrassment. Masachika smirked, relieved to know that she was as easy to deal with as always.

"**<**I know how you feel…**>**"

*Hnnng?!*

He imagined himself vomiting blood, as usual. He thought how it wasn't fair that she consistently struck the moment he let his guard down.

*Oh… Alya can't take her eyes off the good-looking guys at school, either, huh? Must be talking about Hikaru…*

The imaginary blood continued to spew out of his mouth as his mind wandered aimlessly (as a method of self-defense). He didn't care that she was sending him meaningful glances. He didn't care at all. Nope.

"At any rate, there's no way I'd ever have my eyes on Nonoa… unless I had a reason to be on my guard."

"Your guard?"

"Oh, uh…"

His inner thoughts slipped off his tongue, and he stammered.

Explaining why he was suspicious of Nonoa wasn't an easy task, and Alisa might not empathize or even sympathize with how he felt even if he did explain. To most, Nonoa was very well-behaved in spite of her appearance… Probably because of how lethargic she always seemed, she came across as harmless. Masachika agreed with this evaluation. After all, Nonoa was lazy, so she tried to avoid trouble for the most part. Masachika believed she wouldn't do anything to unnecessarily stir the pot… However, he also knew that the only thing that would ever restrain her from taking action would be if it was a pain in the ass to do. While there may have been a few exceptions, there was nothing else that could deter her for the most part. Whether something was illegal or immoral didn't matter. The only thing stopping her was her *own laziness*. If "necessity" happened to surpass "pain in the ass" in her mind, then she would take action, even if that meant going against what was legal or morally right. And Masachika understood this through both experience and his gut instincts, which was why he couldn't help but feel wary and fearful of her. But he didn't plan on explaining that to Alisa. It would make it sound like he was talking about Nonoa behind her back, and he didn't want to brainwash Alisa into thinking Nonoa was a bad person. That was why he promptly began to make excuses.

"Like…whenever she talks to me, her goons are always giving me looks. It's not Nonoa's fault, but they honestly won't stop staring at me even if all Nonoa does is say hi to me, so I get a little wary whenever I see her."

"Oh, okay…"

"Yep. Plus, her blond hair really sticks out, so my eyes are naturally drawn to it."

"Oh? And not mine?"

"I think your silver hair is beautiful as well…"

"I'm kidding." She softly laughed, twirling her hair in the air while continuing:

"I used to have blond hair, too, you know?"

"Y-you used to have blond hair…? …! Oh! You mean like how some kids' eyes and hair change color when they get older? I heard that was a thing in the West! That's so cool!"

Masachika's eyes sparkled with exhilaration, causing Alisa to blink in a somewhat overwhelmed manner.

"Y-yes, but it's rare for hair to lose pigment like mine."

"Really? Heh. A blond Alya, huh?"

"…What? Does that interest you?"

"I am curious to see what you'd look like, to be honest."

"O-oh… Well, I suppose I could show you an old picture of me sometime, then."

"Seriously? I can't wait."

Even now, Alisa's beauty was like something out of a fairy tale, so she must have looked like an adorable little angel when she was a kid. The thought alone made Masachika smile.

*Yuki used to be a little angel, too, when she was younger…unlike now.*

He imagined the little-devil Yuki's sinister cackling "Geh-heh-heh," reminding him how cruel time could be. His eyes went unfocused, and he stared off into the distance. *Where has that little sister gone? Then again, seeing her now would only bring back old wounds, so…*

"Hey…"

"Hmm?"

"What about you, Masachika?"

"…?"

"What were you like as a kid?"

Masachika could feel his expression stiffening at the unexpected question she'd hesitantly asked.

"…Where did that come from?" he asked back with a voice just as stiff as his expression. He wasn't able to come up with a witty comment off the top of his head, and he didn't know how to tactfully reply, either.

"Ah…" Alisa softly grunted, seemingly having noticed the sudden change in his behavior before more timidly responding:

"Well, after figuring out I didn't even know when your birthday was, I realized I didn't know that much about you yet, which could be a problem, so…"

"Oh… All right."

He immediately felt guilty after noticing her discouragement, since he'd ruined the mood because of his behavior. Not wanting to further ruin their date, he switched to a more cheerful tone and continued:

"Well…I took things a lot more seriously back then. I didn't sleep during class, and I never forgot my textbooks, either."

"Really?"

"Yep. I wasn't even an otaku back then. Heh. It was probably becoming an anime nerd back in middle school that made me stop taking things so seriously…"

"Oh…"

Her gaze appeared to grow cold at his joke, but the gears in her head seemed to be moving somewhat rapidly as well.

"…What's your favorite food?"

In his mind, he chuckled at her out-of-nowhere, innocent question…then felt immediate gratitude when he realized she was simply being considerate.

"Hmm… Well, I do like spicy food, as you know. I also love ramen and curry like most people, too."

"Spicy food…"

"Do you not like spicy food?"

"I don't…know why you'd ask that. We ate spicy ramen together. Remember?"

"Oh, right."

He was asking her that *because* it'd been noticeable that she didn't like it. Alisa apparently still hadn't realized how obvious she'd been when she seemed to be on the verge of death while forcing herself to eat that extremely spicy ramen.

*But I'm not going to bring it up anymore if she's this adamant that she doesn't hate spicy food.*

While he was baffled by her stubbornness, Alisa suddenly asked:

"Then is there anything you don't like?"

"Not really. I was raised to not be a picky eater…"

"Huh…"

"Oh. But I wasn't really a fan of the borscht my grandfather used to make. Tasted way too earthy—like straight up dirt to me."

"It was 'earthy'…?"

"Yeah, I think he just doesn't know how to cook beets right, but thanks to that, the borscht you made for me when I was sick was revolutionary. I had no idea soup could be that good," he said, genuinely praising her.

"R-really? I'm glad."

Alisa suddenly looked away, then lifted her chin and began twirling her hair around her finger.

"Then…I suppose I could cook for you again sometime. Maybe next time we do homework together?"

"Wait. What? No, I can't make you cook for me. The borscht took four whole hours to make, right?"

"Of course, you're going to help. You can cook, right?"

"All right… That could work."

"Then it's settled. Let's cook together next time we study at your

place… We should probably go shopping for the ingredients together as well."

"Yeah…sure." Masachika nodded with a somewhat uncomfortable smile.

"Heh." Alisa laughed mirthfully. But her eyes suddenly popped open with realization, and she looked down.

"**<**J-just like a married couple, huh?**>**"

*…Derp.*

She fidgeted and glanced over at him while continuing to play with her hair, but Masachika simply stared into the distance and ignored her, since he had grown accustomed to this behavior. Do nothing. Say nothing.

*A couple, huh?*

But he understood what she meant after giving it some more thought. Shopping together, cooking together, and eating together at the table was just the start of what couples living together did. He imagined the scenario…and was surprised at himself for actually thinking it didn't seem half bad.

*I mean…I don't hate spending time with Alya.*

She was always very stern, very prideful, got after him for the smallest things, and always tried to one-up him…but it never bothered him. He actually thought it was cute how she would take everything so seriously and would put on airs… In fact, he even loved those traits of hers.

*I feel like I'm floating…*

Before he realized it, he was smiling and in a really good mood. As the warmth swelled in his chest, he almost unwittingly wrapped his hand gently around Alisa's.

"…! …What?"

She jumped in astonishment and stopped in her tracks with wide eyes.

"I just wanted to hold your hand. Is that a problem?" asked Masachika, looking back at her with an affectionate smile.

"Huh? Uh…"

His straightforward response flustered her, and her eyes darted about. A few seconds went by until she managed to compose herself, lift her chin, and respond:

"W-well, I suppose some girls like it when the guy is a little assertive like this. Generally speaking, of course. But…hmm…I suppose you can hold my hand. Just this one time, though, okay? I was

the one who suggested we go out today, after all."

Masachika couldn't help but smile at her reasoning—which could easily be interpreted as an excuse.

"I appreciate it. Anyway, ready to go?"

"Y-yes…"

As he gently guided her by the hand, Alisa's expression softened sweetly, and the proud look on her face a few seconds ago was nowhere to be found. She alternatively glanced at their hands and his face while quietly following his lead.

"**<**Quit it… You're making me blush…**>**"

She whispered in Russian, looking away from him and softly squeezing his hand back. Internally writhing in pain…would be what Masachika would usually do but not this time. He smiled a bittersweet smile instead because for some reason, he was at peace and able to accept her bashful comment without even flinching. Meanwhile, Alisa continued to gaze at his profile and his kind, gentle smile. They continued to hold hands and slowly walked among the countless stalls that lined the street downtown near the station. They didn't speak, only conveying how they felt through their shared warmth. They simply felt each other…but after around five minutes went by, Alisa, who was seemingly getting used to holding hands, began to slowly look around with a furrowed brow.

"…Hey."

"Hmm?"

"I'm starting to feel like we're just aimlessly walking without a destination."

Masachika's heart skipped a beat at the sudden accusation, a cold bead of sweat running down his spine. She was right. Hit the nail on the head. In fact, Masachika honestly didn't even know where he was at the moment. He figured if they took a stroll downtown, Alisa would eventually find something that caught her eye…which was another way of saying they *were* aimlessly walking around without a destination. His blind optimism wasn't helping, either, because he was starting to feel like just going on a walk together would be enough… and that was one of the factors that'd led him to this part of town, which he had never been to before.

*But seriously, where am I? Dammit! I should have been paying more attention!*

By the time he came back to his senses, it was already too late. He was completely lost. But telling her that would most certainly put her

in a bad mood, especially since her mood was already starting to sour. Telling her "not to worry because he already had a place in mind" at the start of the date wasn't doing him any favors, either. There was no way he could admit that he was winging it now. That was why, in an act of desperation, he decided to take a chance. Although sweating a cold sweat, he put up a front and looked puzzled as if he couldn't comprehend why she would question his integrity.

"We're not walking around aimlessly downtown, and we're almost there."

"…Really?"

"Yep. We need to take a right at that corner over there, and…"

He promptly pointed at the corner up ahead, even though he obviously had no idea what was over there. That wasn't an issue, though, because he never said the place that he was taking her was just around the corner. There were countless things he could finish his sentence with: "go up the stairs," "check the information board," or even "Huh? Maybe it was that corner over there?" At any rate, he could make any adjustment necessary after they turned the corner.

However, this cheap trick of his failed him the instant they turned the corner…because it was a dead end. There was a single shop at the end of the street…and it was a lingerie shop of all things.

*Good-bye, cruel world.*

Masachika stopped in mute amazement, his face twitching relative to the high stakes of his bet. A violent blizzard seemed to roar next to him, and Alisa's hand tightened around his as if to say, "It's too late to run now."

"Hey."

"Aye."

"Is this where you wanted to take me?"

It was as if her chilling voice echoed from within the deepest layers of the Antarctic permafrost. Masachika realized that this was the final question, and his life depended on his answer, so he faced Alisa with the most earnest of expressions, looked her right in the eye, and replied:

"I figured you were starting to grow out of your old ones, so—"

Those were the last words he said before reaching heaven for a second time that day. He couldn't remember a thing, but what he could recall…was that it wasn't pleasant.

"**<**…How did you know?**>**"

CHAPTER 4

# Uh, are you pulling my leg?

“Too…hot…”

The sizzling sun’s rays beat down on Masachika as he walked, a gym bag hanging over his shoulder. Despite only being eight in the morning, the cruel August sun was already raring to go. The walking part was fine. It was stopping at the crosswalk and having sweat drip down his body that aggravated him.

“I guess this will make the water at the beach feel even better, though.”

He had to tell himself that, or he wasn’t going to make it. Yes, today was the day the student council was going on the beach trip Touya had planned and invited them to before summer break. They were meeting at the station closest to school at eight thirty. From there, they would take the train for a while before getting on a bus to the Kenzaki household’s vacation home. Masachika, who was more of a homebody, was feeling a bit restless because he was excited to swim in the ocean for the first time in a long while. However, the moment the station came into view…he instinctively froze.

“Too hot…”

He wasn’t talking about the temperature…at least, the outside temperature. There was another reason: Touya and Chisaki were already waiting up ahead, and Masachika could tell from afar how hot and heavy things were between those two. They were clearly blushing in anticipation as any young couple in love would before going on

vacation together. They were facing each other, gazing into the other's eyes and holding hands, for crying out loud. Not just one hand. Both hands. Fingers interlocked.

"I can't go over there now…"

Maybe waiting at a distance would be for the best…but the moment that thought came to mind, Chisaki looked back, and they made eye contact.

*…Wait. Could she feel that she was being watched? From this far away?*

"…Looks like I *have* to go over there now."

After mustering up the courage, he unenthusiastically waved to them as he approached. That was when a familiar, luxury foreign car passed by him and stopped at the terminal in front of the station, where two passengers got out from the back seat, grabbed their suitcases out from the trunk, and joined Touya and Chisaki. It was Yuki and Ayano, of course.

*Good timing, Yuki. Now I don't have to feel awkward walking into the middle of whatever that was.*

He imagined himself raising his hands in victory as he joined the four in front of the station.

"Hey, guys."

"Morning, Kuze."

"Morniiing."

"Good morning, Masachika."

"Good day to you, Mr. Masachika."

After everyone exchanged greetings, they briefly discussed the plan for the day until the final two members showed up—ten minutes before the meeting time.

"Sorry to keep you all waiting."

"You have our deepest apologies."

The older sister was waving with the most cheerful of smiles, while the younger sister simply bowed her head in a very serious manner as she approached. The contrast between the Kujou sisters' personalities was like day and night.

*I feel like a fish out of water here!*

That was the first thought that came to Masachika's mind when he took another look at all the girls, who were not in their school uniforms for a change.

*Every single one of them looks incredible!*

He knew that Alisa, Yuki, and Ayano wore very fashionable

clothing on non-school days, but Chisaki and Maria were extremely stylish as well. He could already feel people staring at them. You could even hear people say, “Are they doing a photo shoot here?” and “Are they famous?” if you strained your ears.

*We’re just your average student council… It really does look like we’re about to do a behind-the-scenes photo shoot for some pop group, though.*

Their style was starting to make Masachika feel self-conscious about his off-brand shirt and pants.

“Good morning to you, too, Masachika,” Alisa said emphatically as she turned to face him.

“…Yeah, hey.”

She most likely called him by his first name on purpose and greeted him like that because the others were there…and of course, Yuki took the bait.

“Oh my. Alya, you started calling Masachika by his first name?” Yuki asked, hiding a vulgar smirk behind her ladylike smile.

“Yes,” Alisa replied, showing not even a hint of hesitation. “After thinking about it, I thought it seemed a little standoffish to address my running mate so formally when he uses my nickname. Especially since I call you, my rival, by your first name. So I decided it would be best to call him by his first name as well.”

Alisa smoothly explained her reasoning. There was no doubt that she’d planned this answer in response because she expected someone to bring it up.

“Is that so?”

Much to Masachika’s surprise, Yuki seemed to be convinced rather easily by Alisa’s confident explanation and smug smirk. Yuki then appeared solemn and continued:

“Perhaps it was insensitive of me to continue being so friendly with Masachika even after I declared I was running for student council president…”

“Huh?! N-not at all. I don’t mind. Y-you two have been friends ever since you were little. It’s only natural that you two get along so well.”

“But I should have considered your feelings, too. I did something very callous…”

“I honestly don’t mind!”

Masachika got a bad feeling in his gut for some reason as he watched Alisa frantically respond to Yuki’s unexpected apology.

“…Are you sure it doesn’t bother you?”

“I’m positive. I—I don’t plan on getting in the way of your friendship…”

“Really? Thank goodness!” Yuki responded happily, her face glowing as she took Alisa’s hand with a beaming smile.

“We may be rivals after the same position in the student council, but let us put all that behind us for now and enjoy our vacation. Truce?”

“Oh, uh…sure. Let’s do that,” agreed Alisa, albeit somewhat hesitantly. However, Masachika could see the sinister grin lurking behind Yuki’s smile. It was as if her expression were saying, “You agreed! No take-backs!” *You’re the one always starting fights*, Masachika thought, but he kept his mouth shut because he didn’t want to ruin the mood.

“All right, guys. Everyone ready? Let’s get moving,” Touya encouraged while he began walking toward the station entrance.

“Come on, Masachika! Let’s go!” cheered Yuki as she spun around, seemingly in the best of moods. She skipped over to him and tried to grab his hand, but he swiftly pulled it away, avoiding her grip as if he had predicted her attempt. Yuki, however, showed no concern at all and leaped forward with her arms open wide to wrap them around his, when…

“Come on, Yuki. Ready to go?”

“Huh? Masha?”

…Masha, who had stealthily snuck up on Yuki from the other side, quickly wrapped her arm around Yuki’s.

“Wh-why are we locking arms?”

“Because Alya won’t lock arms with me,” pouted Maria. Masachika and Yuki thought that still didn’t explain why she’d gone for Yuki instead. Yuki, however, swallowed her doubt the instant Maria’s body wrapped tightly around her slender arm. Her eyes briefly narrowed like a creepy old man’s while she stared at Maria’s breasts pressed up against her. Of course, Masachika noticed Yuki’s reaction as well. He could even clearly read her mind: “Whoa! These things are incredible!”

“*Giggle!* I’m so excited. ♪ Hey, Yuki? Do you like octopus ink?”

“Huh…? Octopus…ink…? On food? Wait. Have you had it before?”

“Nope. ♪”

“O-oh… Okay…?”

For a few seconds, Masachika watched Maria guide Yuki to the station by the arm before he turned to Ayano and Alisa.

“Ready to go?”

“Yes.”

“Yeah, let’s go.”

They followed closely behind the others with only a single shared thought in mind: *Masha’s tough.*

◇

Around two hours had passed by the time they transferred to the region’s local train line.

“Wow, check out the inside of this train. Looks like something you’d see in an old movie. ‘Booth seats’? I think that’s what they’re called? Anyway, the seats are facing each other, which is interesting.”

“Agreed. I don’t think I’ve seen anything like this in the city except for a few express trains.”

“Oh, hey! Look! The doors don’t automatically open! You have to press a button to open them!”

“Oh my. You’re right. ♪ I wonder what would happen if you pressed them while the train was moving?”

“Although I doubt the doors would even open, I still better not catch you pushing any buttons, Masha.”

“Hey, I want to take a picture. Ayano, go stand next to Alya for a second.”

“Like this?”

Their eyes curiously darted around the old-fashioned train as if they had stumbled upon romantic ruins. Each member posed in their own way for Yuki, who was in charge of taking pictures during their trip with the student council’s digital press camera, when they suddenly noticed an old lady who appeared to be a local smiling in their direction. Touya lightly cleared his throat.

“Mmm… Well, now that we have taken a picture, I think we should split up into two groups: a group of three and a group of four to give everyone a chance to speak with people they don’t usually get to spend time with. It will allow us to bond as a student council as well.”

“That’s a great idea! How about we split the first-year partners from one another?”

The student council would spend the next forty minutes on the train interacting in two twenty-minute sessions at the suggestion of the student council president and vice president. They were split up into two groups that sat on opposite sides of the aisle.

“Really looking forward to getting to know you.”

“Me too.”

“What is this? A marriage interview?”

Yuki sat next to Masachika, while Chisaki and Touya sat across from them during the first twenty-minute session.

*I thought we were supposed to split everyone up so we could talk to people we don’t normally get a chance to hang out with…so why are the president and vice president still together? …Whatever. I shouldn’t say anything.*

Chisaki, who was sitting right across from him, was giving off this vibe that was saying, “Touya and I are a package deal,” so Masachika decided to swallow his annoyance. He was but a simple worker in the student council. There was no way he would be able to survive the vice president’s iron fist…which was both metaphoric and literal.

“So, uh…what are your hobbies?” asked Masachika, starting the conversation, since Yuki wasn’t saying anything.

“Now this really sounds like a marriage interview.” Touya smirked wryly while Masachika’s shoulders jokingly drooped.

“Yeah, you’re right… Hmm… Then when did you two first fall in love?”

“Now we’re doing a press conference to announce our engagement?”

“W-wait. Do you really want to know?” Chisaki smiled bashfully with both hands covering her blushing cheeks.

“Hmm? Wow, I wasn’t expecting the enthusiasm,” Touya said, raising an eyebrow at his girlfriend, but her eyes were already dazed as she retraced her memories.

“I first noticed I was interested in Touya when… Hmm… Before I tell you that, I need to tell you a little about my childhood.”

“Awesome. I’m all ears.”

As Masachika leaned forward in his chair with deep interest, Chisaki grinned. She gazed at the scenery out the window and began to speak with a note of nostalgia in her voice:

“It all started when I was just a timid, little girl who didn’t even have it in her to kill a bug…”

“Wait. Who’s the story about again?” Masachika instinctively joked with a straight face, taken aback by her unexpected reveal. However, Chisaki showed no concern regarding his rude remark and continued:

“I know this isn’t something people should say about themselves, but I was a really good girl and super cute, to boot. Just like a little

kitten."

"Yeah, bloodthirsty lions are pretty cute when they're kittens."

"I was always very skittish. I spoke in a small voice and was timid…so of course, all the attention-seeking boys at school bullied me. Whenever I went somewhere alone in town, weird old men would always start trying to talk to me. People would stalk me and try to kidnap me… I stopped going to school after a while because I was so afraid of people and distrusting of men."

"…Wait. Really?"

Masachika immediately stopped joking around, although he remained somewhat skeptical of the serious story. He swiftly shot a glance at her boyfriend, who looked back at him grimly. It seemed like Chisaki wasn't making up the story.

"My mom always protected me, and I never had any terribly traumatic experiences, either, but…it was enough for me not to want to go outside anymore and stay locked away in my bedroom."

"…"

"Then one day… Maybe you know it? There was an anime called *Flame Sword*."

"Huh? Oh yeah. I know it. It's pretty famous, so I watched it online."

*Flame Sword* was an original anime that came out a few years ago. The fate of the world was in the hands of a young heroine known as the Spiritualist. After she was kidnapped by an enemy nation as a young girl, the hero, a young man, set out on an adventure to save her. He met countless friends and defeated terrible foes during his journey before eventually reaching the truth of their world and its secrets, which only the heroine knew. Put simply, it was a traditional fantasy tale.

“I watched it when it was first airing on TV…and I was blown away. You know the scene when the heroine talks to the last boss, the emperor, after the battle by the fortress?”

“The scene in the throne room, right?”

“Yeah, that one.”

“Yep, that’s a really famous scene.”

It was the first time the heroine showed she wasn’t some powerless damsel in distress who had to wait for the hero to show up to save her—but instead had a strong will and sense of justice. She directly challenged the emperor, who was trying to use his power to take over the world, and shared her vision with him, even though doing so put her life at great risk. And despite the emperor mocking her ideals, calling them the “naive ramblings of a child,” he started to see the heroine differently. He respected her… Even Masachika squealed in delight when he saw the scene. *“The heroine’s sooo freakin’ badass!”* he yelled that day. It all made sense now. The heroine’s actions changed Chisaki. The instant he came to this conclusion of his, Chisaki continued speaking with deep feeling as though she were reliving the moment:

“When I saw that scene, it hit me. I was like, ‘Oh, power *is* everything.’”

“Huh?”

“Men don’t give you the respect you deserve if you’re weak. The heroine would never have been kidnapped if she had the power to defeat the emperor. I realized at that moment that if you ever wanted to get anything in this world, you need to be strong enough to shut up your enemies first.”

“Wow… She was actually turned off by the heroine’s actions and was influenced by what the emperor did instead…”

“Right after that, I cut my long hair short and started training myself both mentally and physically so no guy would ever look down on me again. Took a hard year’s worth of training at my relative’s dojo but check me out now.”

“And now you’re a killing machine… Definitely some extreme modification went on while you were there…”

Masachika mumbled his honest thoughts while disapprovingly glaring at his sister, who was nodding as if to say, “I know what you mean, Chisaki. Last bosses like the emperor…are awesome.”

“Would it have killed you to have just said, ‘And now you’re a

better version of yourself'? Anyway, I was able to get rid of the whole 'feeble, beautiful young girl' image after that. Now people fear me."

"From man to machine… How tragic… Wait. Comical, perhaps?"

"Anyway, because of that, I really empathized with Touya when I saw how hard he was working to change himself."

"Oh, are we talking about when you first fell in love? The story's moving so fast that I'm having a hard time emotionally switching gears." Masachika smiled stiffly, rolling his eyes at Chisaki, who had suddenly started to glance bashfully at Touya. Yuki cracked a troubled smile as well. And yet those two began to passionately gaze into each other's eyes as if they didn't have a care in the world.

"I was still really surprised when he told me he liked me after having only chatted a few times before."

"Come on, you didn't have to tell them that."

"But because you did that, I realized just how much you had changed."

"Yeah, I got a little too ahead of myself there."

"And you were stuttering, too. Remember?"

"Ahhh! That's enough! Come on!"

Touya sheepishly stared back into Chisaki's smiling eyes, but there was nothing awkward or unfriendly about their exchange. If anything, the entire mood was very sweet and affectionate…as Masachika and Yuki kept their eyes on…anything else.

"I can't take any more of this…"

"What should we do? Should we start flirting, too? Should we hug? Big hug?"

"No."

The siblings whispered to each other while still facing forward, but the flirting couple didn't seem to notice. An entire twenty minutes went by like this until it was time to switch members. Ayano ended up taking Yuki's spot, and Maria sat in front of Masachika.

"Hey. ♪"

"Good afternoon."

"…Hey."

Maria had her usual bubbly smile; on the other hand, Ayano's expression was as blank as always before she immediately turned into air.

*The conversation was dead on arrival…*

Masachika couldn't help but internally joke about the situation, because Maria was usually the listener, and Ayano was usually air. It

was a terrible combination for encouraging discussion. Masachika glared at Ayano with a slightly reprimanding gaze for trying to disappear, despite the fact that they were specifically here to converse and get to know one another.

"Ayano. How about taking the lead and starting the conversation? That is the point of this whole exercise, after all."

"…! You are right. My apologies."

Ayano's shoulders twitched, and she promptly lowered her head as if she agreed with Masachika. After lifting her head back up and letting her eyes wander a bit, she faced Maria with a blank expression and asked:

"What kind of maid uniforms do you like?"

"She had to go for a wild pitch for her first throw…"

"Hmm… If I had to choose, I suppose I would go with something classic? The maid uniforms with the long skirts are so cute, aren't they?" Maria answered.

"She managed to hit the ball?!"

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. But I think miniskirts are really cute, too. I really like anime music, after all." Maria continued with her surprisingly earnest reply.

"Hmm? The ball she hit is veering a bit in an unexpected direction."

"Really? I have studied a little about anime music," Ayano responded.

"And then she caught the ball as if this were only natural. I feel like I'm listening to aliens converse…!"

"You studied anime music? Do you want to be an anime singer and songwriter?"

"No, not at all."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"…"

"……"

"…The game is over if you don't pass the ball back," Masachika pointed out with a fed-up look, since Ayano kept giving simple answers and not engaging. Ayano jumped, then hurriedly began darting her eyes around the inside of the train for inspiration.

"…! O-oh, yes. My mistake. Um…"

"*Giggle.* There is no need to rush." Maria smiled thoughtfully, since

it was obvious Ayano had no idea what to talk about.

"No, but… I, uh…"

But Ayano shrunk almost as if she was ashamed of herself. She blinked a few times before finally squeezing another topic out.

"Um…do you like trains?"

"She's literally using the first thing she saw…"

"I don't really use the train that often."

"And then Masha replies without even a second of hesitation. What kind of saint is she?"

"What about you, Ayano?"

"Me neither…"

"Throw the damn ball back… *Sigh*…"

Masachika patted Ayano on the head to show his appreciation in spite of being annoyed at how the conversation kept dying so quickly. He then took it upon himself to liven up their exchange on behalf of his socially inept childhood friend.

"So you usually take your bike or the bus everywhere?" Masachika picked up the conversation with Maria where Ayano had left off.

"I actually like to walk most places, but…I guess I do take my bike if I'm going somewhere far."

"Really? I'm kind of surprised. I can't really imagine you tearing through town on a bicycle, either."

"Oh my. ♪ Really? I'm actually great with walking. I usually walk instead of taking the train if it's within three stations away, and if it's farther than that, I almost always use my bike."

"That's incredible. I still think taking the train would be faster, though. Do you have something against trains, or…?"

"Not at all. I simply enjoy the scenery when I walk. There's always something new you can find if you walk down streets that you've never been down before, right?"

"Yeah, definitely…" Masachika nodded with a sense of satisfaction, since something immediately came to mind. When he went on a walk around town to find a good restaurant to take Alisa for his birthday (?), he realized that there were surprisingly a lot of places he had never been before in and around town.

"Besides…trains are dangerous, aren't they?" continued Maria, raising an eyebrow slightly.

"Hmm? How so?"

"You know, like how people injure their wrists while holding the hanging straps."

“The hanging…straps…?”

Masachika shifted his gaze toward Ayano, but she shook her head as if she also had no idea what Maria was talking about. It made sense, though. She was like Maria, since she didn’t use the train really thanks to having the Suou driver around to take her everywhere.

“People hurt their wrists with the hanging straps? You mean like if the train makes a sudden stop, and the momentum jerks their arms?”

“That’s a good question. I have never hurt my wrist on the train before, and Chisaki said she hasn’t, either, so maybe it only happens to men?”

“Hmm? Chisaki…? …Hmm? It only happens to men…?”

There was something bothering him about what she was saying… and his cheeks tensed when he suddenly came to a vague realization of what had happened.

“Hey, uh…Masha? Did these people hurt their wrists when you were with Chisaki?”

“Why, yes… It actually happened three or four times when we took the train together before.”

“…Was the train crowded?”

“Hmm… I think I remember the train being crowded enough that there weren’t any hanging straps left to grab on to.”

“Were those men standing next to or behind you, Masha?”

“What?! How did you know?!”

“…Yep.”

Masachika’s eyes were narrowed suspiciously in contrast to Maria’s surprised, wide-eyed expression. The men who hurt their wrists had most likely been… After thinking about it some more, he realized that it wasn’t a surprise she would be targeted. Alisa always had her guard up, and she really stood out, for better or for worse, which meant these men would actually avoid her. In fact, it was to the point that last time they went out together, almost everyone in their train car was sneaking glances at Alisa, and there weren’t a lot of questionable men among those onlookers. Meanwhile, Maria’s hair color and skin tone didn’t stand out as much as Alisa’s, and creeps were naturally drawn to her gentle aura.

*And once they get too close…their wrists get the chop.*

After realizing what was happening, he looked over at Chisaki on the other side of the aisle with a trembling gaze and asked Maria:

“How did Chisaki react to their injuries?”

“Hmm? Oh… She is amazing. She always takes the initiative and

walks the injured men to the stationmaster's office. I always try to help, but I don't know enough first aid, so I have no choice but to let Chisaki take care of things."

"…Fascinating."

"…? What do you mean? Did you figure out what was happening?"

"Oh, no…but I think you should make sure to continue bringing Chisaki with you whenever you take the train from now on as well."

"Wow. Chisaki said the same thing. It's not like I'd ever have a reason to ride the train alone for the most part, though…"

A random thought suddenly came to mind, and Masachika figured it'd be a good excuse to change the subject, so he asked:

"What about your boyfriend? You don't take the train when you go out together?"

"Huh? Oh… It's currently a long-distance relationship, so we never really get the chance to go anywhere together."

"Ohhh. He's Russian, right? At least, that's what I heard through the grapevine."

"Hmm?"

"Wait. He's not?"

"Oh, right… His name."

"…? What was that?"

"Don't worry about it. ♪ What about you two?"

"…?"

"Is there anyone…you like right now?" Maria cheerfully asked, leaning slightly forward with her hands clasped in front of her chest. Relationships. It was a topic that many young women enjoyed, but it made both Masachika and Ayano curiously tilt their heads in unison.

"Uh… I'm more into 2D girls myself. Just can't get into 3D."

Ayano suddenly blinked in confusion as if she took what Masachika just said at face value.

"Are you sure? Because I vaguely remember you having a girlfriend in elementary school and—"

"No! That… That doesn't count because we were kids. I wasn't an otaku back then, either."

He frowned a bit, because even though she didn't mean to upset him, it was a past he had no interest in remembering. He then put Ayano under the spotlight while pretending to not notice the curiosity brimming in Maria's eyes.

"What about you, Ayano? Is there anyone you like?"

“I have two—*too* many responsibilities to accept such an offer. My top priority is Lady Yuki.”

“Wait. Has someone asked you out before?”

“Yes, twice in the past.”

“…Wow.”

Masachika was genuinely taken off guard by the surprising news. There was something that bothered him about two guys asking his childhood friend out.

“Are you curious about them?”

“Huh? Oh, uh… Yeah, I guess?”

“I could tell you their names if you wished.”

“Nah, don’t. Take their names with you to the grave.”

Masachika stopped Ayano from hurting these two guys any further, then frantically scratched his head.

“I mean…I am curious, but it’s more like…I’m moved that the concept of love isn’t completely foreign to you anymore. I’ve known you for so long, and before I even realized it, you were all grown up… What am I saying? I’m not your mom.”

“I do not plan on getting myself involved in any sort of romance, though…”

“Yeah, I know… Oh, and watch how you say that. One wrong mistake, and it’ll sound like you’re bragging about being really popular.”

After another sigh, Masachika faced Maria once more and shrugged.

“Anyway, as you can see, there’s absolutely nothing interesting going on in our lives.”

“So neither of you plans on ever falling in love?”

“Not really…”

“Never.”

“Oh… That’s too bad…”

Maria leaned back in her seat and slumped, but Masachika was inwardly relieved… However, his relief would prove to be short-lived.

“Then how about you tell us about your girlfriend from elementary school, Kuze?”

“Wait. What? Come on, give me a break.”

He lowered his head, glancing in Ayano’s direction for help. She then firmly gazed back into his eyes, nodded, and stated:

“I am genuinely curious about her as well.”

“Ayano?!” shrieked Masachika, caught off guard by his friend’s

betrayal. The next ten minutes were a clash between two women extremely curious about a past relationship and a man who felt like he was in hell.

CHAPTER 5

# That was no wrestling.

“Whoa…,” Masachika uttered unconsciously as he stood before the sand and the vast blue sea. It was an approximately three-hour journey from the station closest to school. After exiting the station, they had lunch and did some shopping before hopping on a bus for another thirty-minute ride, and then it was a ten-minute walk from the bus stop to the Kenzaki residence’s vacation home. The walls of the spacious, two-story stylish cottage were painted a brilliant white. You could invite ten, even twenty people over and still have plenty of room to spare. But what was most surprising of all was the private beach. All you had to do was open the sliding glass door to the patio in the first-floor living room, and you were at the beach, which was even more private than any of them had imagined. Why? Because the entire area was surrounded by trees, blocking off the outside world, with the exception of the beachside path right behind the cottage. Furthermore, the eighty-meter-wide beach was sandwiched between two rocky terrains that were essentially cliffs, which meant that nobody could just sneak in. Put simply, this beach, which was eighty meters wide and fifteen meters long, was basically cut off from the outside world by the surrounding woods and cliffsides. It was only natural for Masachika to audibly gasp at their own secluded little world, especially since he’d been expecting the beach to be connected to areas that any tourist could use.

“Our own private island… Well, I guess it’s not an island, but still.”

“Ha-ha. I know how you feel.” Touya nodded as they took in the view. The guys had already changed into their bathing suits and were waiting outside for the others. Incidentally, there were two rooms for two and a room for three at the cottage. After some discussion, it was decided that the two guys would stay in one of the doubles, while the second-year girls would stay in the other, which left the triple for the three first-year female students. Masachika was a little apprehensive about Alisa staying in the same room as their rivals, Yuki and Ayano, but it was Alisa herself who’d requested to. (It was more about not having to stay in the same room as Maria, though.)

“By the way, you really are muscular, huh?” Masachika noted in admiration as he checked out Touya in his swimsuit. He’d always thought the president looked like he was in shape, but Touya was even more chiseled than Masachika had imagined. He had ripped pecs with thick arms and legs, to boot. That, coupled with the fact that he was over a hundred eighty centimeters tall and was wearing disposable contact lenses instead of his usual glasses, made him look like a professional wrestler.

“I’m not as muscular as I look, though. I have big bones. They even used to call me ‘tubby’ back in the day,” Touya said with a bashful smirk, noticing his schoolmate’s admiration.

“Big-boned, you say? Uh-huh…”

Thanks to his nerdy brain, Masachika was imagining his schoolmate’s old self as a badass-looking dwarf. Throughout Masachika’s somewhat rude meandering thoughts, Touya was checking him out as if he was impressed as well.

“You’re actually in really good shape yourself. I can see you work out. Nice abs.”

“Oh, thanks. I only do small, twenty-minute workouts every day, but I never have much trouble getting abs if I want them,” Masachika replied aloofly, despite being praised. After joining the student council, which actually required a good deal of stamina, he noticed that he was losing muscle mass and strength, so he’d started working out again a little over a month ago. But he knew his muscles were nothing more than for show, which was why he didn’t know how to respond to the praise.

“…Oh, right. We should probably get the umbrellas and beach loungers all set up and ready to go.”

“Wait. You have beach loungers, too? Do we really need a beach umbrella when we have the patio, though? Plenty of shade over

there."

"I guess it really depends on what everyone's in the mood for. Anyway, give me a second. I'm going to go look for the stuff."

"Oh… All right."

Touya promptly walked across the patio and went back inside. While Masachika definitely wanted to help, he was hesitant to search someone else's house, so he decided to wait for Touya to return without a clue of what to do with himself. But not even a minute went by when the sliding glass door to the living room opened again. Standing there was Yuki, wearing a pink checkered bikini. She almost immediately noticed Masachika standing around, so after making sure the coast was clear, she rushed over to him, flip-flops clapping against the sand.

"Big brother, big bwother, big bwothaaa," she rapidly repeated in a soft voice as she approached him.

"What happened? Your voice software is even buggier than usual."

He wryly smirked until his sister suddenly stopped right in front of him with her face twisted with fear.

"Monster… There's a monster inside…"

Her voice trembled.

"Huh? A monster?"

"A very powerful-looking creature… No Japanese person would ever stand a chance."

Just when he finally realized what she was referring to, the glass patio door opened once more, revealing the monster herself. Her skin was brilliantly pale in the summer sunlight, and her silver hair danced in the wind. The sky-blue lacy bikini held her ample breasts while emphasizing her tiny waist like a work of art. A pareu was wrapped around her waist, but a thin piece of cloth could hardly hide her seductive hips, nor could it do anything to contain her plump thighs and bafflingly long legs peeking out from the slits.

"Jaw drops. Awooga! Hubba-hubba!"

"Ah yes, a classic."

"Sh-she looks like an hourglass with flesh on it!"

"Now you're being gross. I know what you mean, though."

"A body like that should be illegal. I mean, check out that curve from her lower back to her ass. What do you eat and how do you train to get that way?"

"…It's hard to imagine you two are the same age."

"It's like she's from another planet. I refuse to believe there's a

fifteen-year-old girl with a pro-model body like that!"

"Dude, don't be so hard on yourself. You've got some really nice ribs on ya," he teased while glancing down at his trembling sister.

"Right? But look more closely at Alya. You can kinda see her ribs, too. How can you have tits that big and still have your ribs kind of poking out like that? Unbelievable. She seriously only has fat in all the right places."

She snorted with a self-deprecating smirk.

"…I'm going to be real with you. I don't see the appeal in visible ribs. Not one bit."

The siblings continued their exchange until Alisa noticed their gazes and began to cross the patio…when someone suddenly called out to her and stopped her from behind. When she turned around, Chisaki and Maria emerged from the glass doorway to the living room.

"Sweet god! Check out those melons!"

"Quit it."

He glared at Yuki with disgust for her unhinged reaction to Maria's body, but he couldn't help but empathize after giving Maria and Chisaki another look. Maria was wearing a ruffled white bikini and had, in a way, a body that was even more incredible than her sister's. She had the wicked figure of a bikini model with an almost contradicting innocent, youthful smile. If you saw her in a magazine, you wouldn't feel she was out of place at all.

"Boom. Boom."

"Enough with the meaningless sound effects."

"Are those G-cups? No… H?"

"Stop. Come on."

"Hold on. We mustn't rush things. Relative grading is fine, but absolute grading is just as important. Hmm… At first glance, she is bigger in all the right places, but when you consider the difference in height, Alya has mass, which—"

"Enough."

"Ouch!"

Masachika smacked the back of Yuki's head before she could continue her straight-faced, ridiculous analysis any further, but her leering gaze almost immediately found its way back to the Kujou sisters as if she was unreformable.

"Mmm… But when you look at them side by side, Masha seems to have a little extra meat around the waist…"

"She's more than skinny enough. Alya just has a really toned body.

That's all."

"Heh. The fact that their body types slightly differ like this makes it even hotter," Yuki mentioned with a pervy gaze, as if she were some creepy old man, before switching her attention toward Chisaki.

"Those aren't words that should be coming out of a teenage girl's mouth."

"And this other lady… Snap… Crackle… Pop."

"Did you break something? …Did you seriously just check out her biceps, abs, then thighs while making sound effects?"

His gaze slid to where Chisaki stood in a high-neck bikini, and his expression instantly grew tense. She had a wonderful body as well but in a way far different from Maria. He could tell even from a distance. It went beyond your average athlete. Her six-pack was more toned than Masachika's. Her entire body was more ripped than it was "feminine" and soft—like the body of a wild animal.

"…A warrior and a cleric?"

"…I know exactly what you mean."

They exchanged a nod while imagining the traditional party in an RPG…when all of a sudden, Touya appeared behind the two ladies with a beach umbrella and some beach loungers under his arms.

"Oh, look. The party's tank is here with his shield."

"…Wait. Is Alya the hero in this scenario?"

"Of course she is. Look at the president. Look at him. Do you think that guy could ever get a harem? So Alya wins by default."

"Rude."

The four others on the patio exchanged words as the siblings continued their nerdy conversation, but…

"Wow. Somehow, it's like Chisaki's the only one he can see, even with those two by his side."

There was no way a man could avoid being captivated by their beauty. It didn't help that these two extremely sexy sisters were standing on each side of Touya, either. And yet his eyes were locked on Chisaki as if to say, "You're the only one for me." Masachika gained even more respect for the man, while Yuki grumbled in admiration as well.

"Love is blind… Wait. Maybe he just likes small tits?"

"Now that was rude."

After softly chopping Yuki's head, Masachika suddenly decided to look around for the final member…when he noticed Ayano was standing on the opposite side of him in complete silence. Needless to

say, he jumped.

"…How long have you been there?"

"…A while."

She stared up at him with her usual blank expression and her long black hair in a bun. Exactly how long she had been standing there was a mystery.

"Oh, uh… That bathing suit looks really nice on you," he praised, sensing some slight awkwardness.

"Thank you."

Masachika was being honest, though. Unlike the others, Ayano was actually wearing a mature, one-piece swimsuit that emphasized her nice figure while still showing less skin. Yuki, who was standing next to him, suddenly sauntered over to Ayano's side with a mischievous smirk.

"You ain't seen nothin' yet, bro. Ayano, turn around."

"As you wish."

"Check it out. Sexyyy, right?" gushed Yuki as Ayano spun around. Masachika was quick to see why as well. It was sexy. The back side of Ayano's swimsuit was almost nonexistent. It was a backless piece of swimwear with only some string tying the piece together, essentially exposing every inch of her body from the nape of her neck to the top of her butt. There was something strangely alluring about the fact that most of her body was covered in the front yet so exposed in the rear. Yuki pointed at Ayano's beautiful back with a smug grin.

"Whaddaya think?"

Masachika quietly observed Ayano's exposed back, especially the intersecting shoestring tied together.

"Reminds me of a whole smoked ham that—"

"Do you wanna die?"

"Oh, uh… She looks just like a Hollywood movie star? Yep."

Doom filled the air, and he immediately tried to smooth things over. Despite this, his sister continued to glare at him like a hit man for the next few seconds until the others started walking over, seemingly having finished their conversation. Yuki's scowl instantly curled into a ladylike smile.

"At any rate, I will be emphasizing my stomach while Ayano will be competing with her back, so we're counting on you."

"I have no idea what you two are counting on me to do, but knock yourselves out."

He parted with those words and rushed over to Touya to help him

skewer the beach umbrella into the ground. In the meantime, the others set up the beach loungers and sheets.

"Hmph! That should do it."

"Phew. That was a lot harder than I thought it'd be."

Masachika looked up, sweat dripping down his body after having just put up the umbrella, when he suddenly made eye contact with Alisa, who seemed like she had something on her mind. She, however, instantly looked away and began fidgeting with her hair as if to say, "I was just watching you set up the umbrella. What's the problem?" Her body remained facing in his direction, though, which was one of the reasons she was so easy to read.

"You look really cute, Alya," he complimented with a crooked smirk.

"…! I do? Thanks," she curtly replied without even glancing in his direction.

"*Giggle.* Awww.He said you looked cute, Alya."

Maria suddenly wrapped her arms around Alisa.

"Hey?! G-get off me!"

"Ah. ♪"

Alisa knocked her sister's arm away as though she was annoyed before immediately creating some distance between them, but all Masachika could see was the unbelievable amount of jiggling the force caused to a certain region of Maria's body. Could you really blame him, though? There was only a small piece of string holding the bikini together in the middle, which meant you could clearly see her cleavage… At least, that was the excuse Masachika kept telling himself before he swiftly looked up and away from Alisa's icicle-like piercing gaze.

"You look really good, too, Masha."

"*Giggle.* ♪ Thank you. ♪"

Masachika was immediately overcome with guilt as Maria smiled innocently, making it unclear whether she'd noticed his leering.

"Masachika, Masachika, Masachika."

A finger rapidly poked his thigh. When he looked down, Yuki was sitting on the beach sheet with her back turned to him. She had her hands wrapped behind her head as she lifted up her hair, exposing her bare back.

"Can you rub some lotion on me?" she asked with an inviting, sidelong glance.

"I'd rather die."

“Ouch.”

She shrugged at his cold reply and briskly stood up.

“I’m kidding. I already put some sunscreen on before leaving the house.”

“Then stop wasting my time.”

“I was simply playing into the trope for you.”

“Which loses all its excitement when it’s you.”

“Oh? Would it be more exciting for you if I were Alya, perhaps?”

“Huh?” grunted Alisa in surprise. Masachika reflexively looked back at her, and their gazes met once more. However, this time, her eyes narrowed before she quickly crouched and covered herself with both arms as if she was worried that he was going to do something to her.

“Seriously? I’m not going to rub lotion on you… Can you even tan? I always kind of thought Russians and the like would only get red but never actually tan.”

“Yes, I can tan. A little. There are people who only turn red, though, but you would still need to put on sunscreen, regardless.”

“Oh… Right…”

In spite of his best efforts to change the subject, Alisa’s wary gaze did not waver, so Masachika decided to face Touya instead to escape the awkwardness.

“So, uh… Ready to do this?”

“Hold on… Before that…”

Touya’s eyes wandered in a bashful way for a few moments as he hesitantly continued:

“…we might never get the chance to do this again, so how about we all run toward the ocean together and yell, ‘The beach!!’?”

“…What?”

Masachika was legitimately baffled by the random suggestion and frowned. Touya immediately seemed depressed, so Chisaki spoke up hurriedly and stammered:

“Y-yeah, it wouldn’t be a beach vacation without that. Let’s do it. Timing everything perfectly and synchronizing with one another would be a good way for the student council to become closer.”

“Uh-huh…”

Once everyone realized this was probably something Touya had always dreamed of doing, they exchanged glances and compassionately decided to follow along.

“Hey, why not take a picture, too? We can use the timer. Hmm…

Oh. How about we put it over there on the patio table?" Yuki suggested, taking out her digital camera.

"Wait… Are you really going to take a picture?" Alisa asked somewhat timidly as she covered her body with both arms.

"I simply want to capture this shared memory. I will not send pictures of anyone in their bathing suit to anyone other than the people in the picture if requested."

"O-oh… I guess it's fine if that's the case…"

Alisa agreed to Yuki's idea, but there was something about how she phrased it that kind of bothered Masachika. However, he left it alone. Once the camera was set up, everyone took off their flip-flops and lined up straight on the sand, staying perfectly still until Touya took the lead and…

""""The beach!!""""

"Th-the beach!"

"The beach."

Five shouted with glee in unison, one stuttered in their gallant attempt, and another simply spoke in a monotone voice. An indescribable energy filled the air of the midsummer beach as the camera shutter clicked in the background. Immediately, Alisa uncomfortably drooped her shoulders, while Ayano curiously tilted her head with a blank expression.

"…Yep. Perfect. Let's do this!"

"Wait. Are we seriously not going to do anything about the awkward—?"

"Come on, Touya! Race me to that boulder!"

"Shall we join them, Ayano?"

"As you wish, Lady Yuki."

All four of them then rushed toward the sea as if to say, "Like hell I'm doing this any longer!" ignoring Masachika's pleas. Those who were left were Masachika, the Kujou sisters, and an awkward silence.

"So, uh… Ready to have some fun?"

"…"

He'd hesitantly asked Alisa, but she continued to look away uneasily, so he had no choice but to turn his focus to Maria for help… only to realize that she was already back under the beach umbrella for some reason.

"Masha? You're not going to swim?"

"Don't worry about me. ♪ I'll be right over after I inflate this." She smiled comfortably while taking a seat on the beach blanket. She then

pulled a deflated swimming ring out of her bag and began to unfold it as she cheerfully confessed:

"Actually, I can't swim."

"…?"

Masachika looked over at Alisa in clear shock.

"Uh… Oh. Do people not swim much in Russia? Because the water freezes?"

"Of course people in Russia swim. We even learn how to swim at school. We could swim at the beach in the summer back when we lived in Vladivostok."

"…And yet she can't swim."

He almost added, "Despite having two natural floating devices attached to her?" but he quickly swallowed his words before making that mistake. And yet Alisa still narrowed her sharp, disgusted gaze at him as though she could somehow read his mind.

"…We never went swimming much as a family. That's all."

"O-oh, that makes sense. There are a lot of people in Japan who don't know how to swim, either, now that I think about it. There are even things the great Masha can't do, huh! I think that's really cool! It makes her unique!" he roared, trying to smooth things over before immediately turning around to head into the ocean. But before he could utter, "See you two there," somebody grabbed his wrist from behind.

"Uh… Alya?"

A bad feeling tugged at his organs as he timidly turned around, where he was met with Alisa's stern gaze.

"You forgot to stretch."

"Yes, ma'am…"

◇

Masachika freely swam through the calm sea, which was far clearer than he ever imagined. It was so clear that he could see three meters deep with goggles on.

*Whoa! That's a lot of fish. I could just sit here and watch this all day without ever getting bored.*

Slightly regretting that he hadn't brought a snorkel, he continued his relaxing swim while taking in the view.

"Pfft! Ahhh."

After he started to tire a bit, he decided to go back to shore and

began doing breaststrokes toward the beach, but only after swimming for a few seconds…he noticed *that* and panicked. All he could see was someone's backside gently rocking in the water along with the waves, and it looked a hundred percent like a dead body—Ayano's dead body.

"What the…?! Ayano!!" He yelled out to her and swam using a freestyle stroke as quickly as he could.

"…? Yes?"

But Ayano only lifted her head up as if there was nothing out of the ordinary. She then brushed her hair back, took the snorkel out of her mouth, and curiously stared back at Masachika.

"Oh, uh… Are you okay?"

"…? Why wouldn't I be?"

"No reason…"

After her reaction made it obvious that she wasn't drowning, he smiled stiffly and asked:

"Are you having fun?"

"Yes, very much."

"…Good. Sorry I bothered you."

"You did not bother me at all."

"Anyway, I'm going to head back to land…"

"Very well."

She nodded slightly, then put her snorkel back on and began to float in the water once more. She didn't swim. She simply surrendered herself to the softly rocking waves. Although puzzled by the unique way she amused herself, Masachika returned to shore, lay down, and enjoyed the sensation of water and sand brushing against his body with the tide.

"Man, this feels amazing."

Even when he closed his eyes while facing the sky, his eyelids glowed red under the brilliant sun. Although it was slowly burning his exposed skin, there was something that felt so good about it when combined with the cold ocean beating against his legs and sides. Each wave pushed his body a bit toward his head, splashing against his cheeks before drawing back and dragging his body ever so slightly into the sand. He continued relishing the almost indescribable sensation for a while after that until he suddenly heard the sound of water splashing…and was immediately hit in the face with a huge load of water from above.

"Pffft! Peh! Ack!"

He promptly sat up and exhaled from his nose as hard as he could

while he wiped his face off with his hands. After somehow managing to prevent the salt water from going all the way down his nose, he immediately looked in the direction of the sound when…

"Yo. Having fun, bro?"

"Tsk. Of course it was you."

It was Yuki, smugly smirking down at him.

"Are you sure you should be showing the real you outside like this?"

"Why not? Everyone else is way over there."

She then shifted her gaze toward the sea and tilted her head in wonder.

"More importantly, when's the giant octopus gonna show up? I've been waiting all day."

"Don't worry. There aren't going to be any giant octopus monsters."

"Impossible! It wouldn't be the beach without a giant octopus or jellyfish or sea anemone emerging from the sea and doing a little tentacle erotica!"

"Maybe that's a thing in the smut world, but there would be mass panic if something like that happened in the real world!"

"But…then…why the hell am I even here? What's the point of it all?"

"To swim?"

Masachika coldly glared at his sister, who dropped to the ground on all fours.

"Well…if there aren't going to be any erotic events, then we'll just have to focus on the things we can do and knock those off the list… Come on. Let's do that thing." She sighed, slowly standing to her feet.

"What thing?"

"Do I have to spell it out for you, you numbskull?! Everyone knows that when you're at the beach, *that thing* means splashing water at each other!"

"How the hell was I supposed to guess that?! But I suppose it is kind of an unwritten rule to do that at the beach!"

*That is something you do, huh*, thought Masachika while imagining various scenes like that from anime and comics:

*"Take this!"*

*"Ah! It's so cold! Now you've done it! Take this!"*

Yuki wasted no time, quickly crouching down and sticking both hands into the water before scooping a copious amount of water and

hurling it at him.

"Wataaah!"

…Maybe it was just his imagination, but he felt that girls shouted far cuter things in comics.

"Hmph…! Pfft!"

The splash flew right toward his face with perfect precision, but he swiftly turned his head and softened the blow. His cheek twitching, he quickly faced her once more and splashed as much water at her as he could with his right arm, creating an arch of destruction.

"Woooweeee!" Yuki cried bizarrely, covering her face with both hands and blocking before immediately swinging her hands to counterattack. They went back and forth like this for a while until they stopped taking turns and went full-blown relentless. The siblings then continued to pummel each other in a half-sitting position at point-blank range.

"Do you really think you can defeat me like that?!"

"Mmmng?! Take this!"

"Hey?! You can't use your legs!"

"Mwa-ha-ha-ha!"

"Pfft! Ha-ha-ha!"

"Ha-ha…! Ha-ha-ha-ha…! …*Sigh.*"

"Yuki…what's up?"

Masachika stopped splashing after noticing her brilliant smile had suddenly faded. The instant their game stopped, the water droplets dripping from their hair and chins conveyed a feeling of melancholy.

"It's just…this is a lot more boring than I thought it'd be."

"Don't say that when you're the one who wanted to do it. Now I feel awkward."

"I guess this is something only slow-witted couples with tiny brains can enjoy for more than thirty seconds."

"Come on. Don't you think you could have phrased that a little more nicely?"

"Sorry. I guess you have to be some low-IQ, hillbilly couple to—"

"I'm asking you to be polite! Not change the phrasing to—"

"Shut up!"

"Huh?! Ah…!"

Yuki suddenly leaped at Masachika, so he naturally took a step back…when he slipped in the sand as a wave came crashing in, causing him to fall backward. A fountain of water burst into the air as he slammed onto the ground.

“Bff! *Hack! Cough!*”

Although the water wasn’t even knee-high, you could still easily drown if you flipped over. After Masachika placed his hands on the ground in a panic and lifted himself out, he blew water out of his nose and glared at Yuki out of the corner of his eye…while she clung to his neck.

“What is wrong with—?”

“Into the water with ya!”

“Huh?! Ah!”

Without his hands supporting him, he was easily pushed underwater again as his back hit the ground once more.

“The hell?!”

The water got into his nose this time and burned. Fighting tears, he forced his way up and fiercely pushed his sister away.

“Mn…! Heh… Heh-heh-heh! You’ve still got a lot to learn, my dear brother. Gravity favors the one who’s on top!”

“Feels like you’re really struggling to me. Tsk! I think it’s time you learn that a little sister is never a match for an older brother!”

Masachika fought back, immaturely letting his size and strength advantage do the talking. After a few tugs, he managed to completely sit up before he began to push Yuki down. She clawed into the sand with her toes, desperately struggling to remain standing, but retaliating after being pushed back this far proved to be difficult. Masachika smirked smugly, confident of victory…when all of a sudden, Yuki screamed by his ear:

“Ayano! Now!”

“That’s not going to work on—”

“Forgive me, Sir Masachika!”

“Where the hell did you come from?!”

Despite the fact that she’d been playing dead-body-in-the-water far away not too long ago, he heard Ayano’s voice coming from right behind while simultaneously being put into a full nelson. But what made him panic the most were the soft mounds tightly pressing against his bare back, with only a thin piece of cloth in between. A surprise beautiful-girl sandwich—that’s what this was. Well, the one in the front happened to be his sister, so that sucked, but it was hard to remain calm when the one behind him was his childhood friend, and Yuki capitalized on this brief moment of panic, pushing him down on his side.

“Gnnng!”

He scowled, feeling the water going into his ear after his shoulder was submerged.

“Ayano! Grab his right arm!”

“My apologies!”

“If you’re going to apologize, then don’t—”

They grabbed his arms and legs as they climbed on top of and pulled him—doing everything they could to keep him down in the water. While it would be most guys’ dream to have two beautiful women in swimsuits clinging to them, the girls’ behavior was uncivil and wild, making it not fun at all. In fact, Masachika had to start fighting back rather seriously to escape, which he actually managed to do a few minutes later. Ultimately he booked it to dry land, where he immediately collapsed on all fours, frantically gasping for air.

“I didn’t come…all the way to the beach…to wrestle, dammit…”

“Are you okay? I apologize. I went too far.”

“You’re fine, Ayano. Yuki’s the problem. Hey, stop poking me.”

After facing Ayano, who was squatting by his side and gently rubbing his back, he swiftly turned a disgusted glare to his opposite side, where Yuki was squatting and poking his cheek with a smug grin.

“That was no ordinary wrestling. You got to sumo-wrestle with two beautiful young girls in their swimsuits.”

“I worry about you sometimes.”

Yuki, who was beaming with evident satisfaction, innocently raised an eyebrow at her brother, water dripping off the ends of his hair.

“You say that, but I know ya liked rubbing up against our soft skin. I mean, look at ya. You’re blushing.”

“I’m red because I wasn’t getting enough oxygen,” he calmly corrected, but Yuki gracefully swept aside his complaint and stood up as if it was none of her concern.

“So now that my dear brother has had his fun, how about we go for another swim? Oh, I think I saw a board-shaped float earlier. Why don’t we inflate it?”

“But…”

“Ayano, go hang out with Yuki. Don’t worry about me. I’m just going to rest here for a bit longer.”

“…As you wish.”

After watching Yuki enthusiastically fly back to the cottage with Ayano hesitantly following behind, Masachika sat on the sand and gazed at the ocean.

“Hmm? Where did Touya and Chisaki go?” he wondered aloud, only seeing the Kujou sisters in the distance. He surveyed the boulder they’d apparently raced to earlier, but they weren’t there, either.

“…Well, if it’s anyone who doesn’t need searching for, it’s them.”

They weren’t going to drown. Not them. And if they were enjoying a private date on the other side of the boulder, then obviously, Masachika wouldn’t want to ruin that. After making up his mind, he casually looked to his left—where Alisa was swimming—then shifted his gaze toward the opposite direction, where he saw Maria gently floating in her swim ring somewhat far away from shore. She continued to float…and float…and… Was she slowly being pulled out to sea?

“…! Is she going to be okay?”

He thought back to how Maria had said she couldn’t swim, then he started to make his way toward her with a tinge of anxiety in his heart.

“Masha!”

“Oh, Kuze. Hey. I had no idea you were such a fast swimmer. ♪”

“Yeah, I… Forget about that. What about you? Are you okay? Because it looks like the tide’s pulling you out to sea,” he asked while treading water, although he was somewhat taken aback that she’d welcomed him with her usual bubbly smile.

“I thought that might be the case, but I wasn’t sure,” she replied, placing her right hand on her cheek and tilting her head in a slightly troubled manner.

“So you are being pulled out to sea!”

“I tried to swim back to shore, but it only ended up making things worse for some reason. ♪”

“This is no laughing matter, Masha.”

“Hmm… But crying isn’t going to help me, either. It’d just make the water sweet.”

“What?”

“Oh, but if that happens, I guess I’d become kind of like a seal, so that would help, huh?”

“Masha.”

“Alya would be so surprised, I bet.”

“Masha! Why are you talking nonsense all of a sudden?!”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

Seeing her baffled expression, Masachika pinched the bridge of his nose and decided to give up trying to understand her seemingly random gibberish.

“Anyway, Masha, you can’t swim, so if your float flips over this far out, you’re going to die.”

“Mmm… I don’t know. I think someone would notice and come save me before that happened.” She smiled without even a smidgen of unease. *Is she really going to be okay?* he thought, worried.

“Next time, please call for help a little earlier, okay?”

“I’m sorry. ♪ But you still came for me, Kuze.”

“…You just got lucky I happened to see you.”

“*Giggle.* Even then, I appreciate it. Thank you.” Maria gently smiled as though she truly did trust him with her life. Masachika blushed.

“*Sigh*… Whatever. As long as you’re safe,” he muttered as he swiftly looked away, which made Maria smile even more. It was as if she was watching something heartwarming, but at the same time, like her smile saw deep into his soul, making Masachika restless.

“Anyway, ready to go back to shore?”

“Yes, please. ♪”

“Uh…”

However, once he actually started thinking about how he was going to get Maria to shore, he started to second-guess where he should grab. If this was a man he was dealing with, he could simply stick his arm inside the swim ring and pull, but he was hesitant whether that’d be appropriate with a woman. There wouldn’t be a problem if the ring had strings attached to it, but unfortunately, there was nothing like that in sight, either.

“I’m ready when you are. ♪”

“Oh, uh… Yeah…”

Maria held out her right hand, which he timidly grabbed. It was smaller than his and soft—delicate to the point that it felt like it would shatter if he squeezed too tightly, yet it was very comforting.

*“Giggle.”*

“Wh-what?”

“Oh, nothing. ♪”

Masachika looked away from her meaningful smile and began to swim toward the shore. He made sure to keep his leg movement to a minimum so that he wouldn’t kick her while swimming with only one arm and tugging her along.

“Wow. ♪ We’re going so fast. ♪ You’re so strong, Kuze. ♪”

He could feel his back suddenly start to flush as she yelled in admiration and excitement from behind. Masachika was a boy, after all. Being showered with innocent compliments by a cute girl would,

of course, make him want to work twice as hard.

"Hmm…? Kuze, you have a bruise of some kind on your shoulder…," she suddenly mentioned, a hint of worry in her tone.

"Huh…? Ah."

*Oh, right. I completely forgot about that*, he thought, glancing back.

"It's an old wound. It doesn't hurt anymore."

"Really?"

Maria seemed to be worried, but it really didn't hurt, and it was on the back side of his shoulder, so he usually just forgot about it.

"Did something happen? Was it some kind of accident?"

"It wasn't anything big. I just got bit by a dog. That's all."

But the instant he uttered those words and faced forward, he felt Maria's hand tighten around his, making him panic a bit.

"It seriously isn't a big deal. I was just being a show-off and didn't get it properly treated, so it left a little mark…"

It happened a long time ago when he used to meet that girl in the park as a kid. One day, when they were playing together, something excited a large-breed dog, and it suddenly lunged at the girl. Masachika had instantly tackled the dog to protect her, but he ended up getting bitten on the right shoulder while trying to overpower it. Fortunately, the owner made it over in time and managed to pull the dog away using nothing but brute force, so the wound didn't end up being that deep. Masachika, however, wanted to show off in front of the girl and not worry her. Furthermore, he was worried that Gensei was going to blame his paternal grandmother if he made a big deal out of the injury, so he only did the bare minimum to treat the wound. The doctor back then said that the scar would slowly fade as he got older, but he ended up being left with a light-purple scar. Masachika didn't really care anymore, though.

"Men are fine with a few scars anyway. My grandfather even laughed and said scars were a man's badge of honor. Oh, I got it when I was trying to protect a friend, by the way."

"…Oh."

By the unusual, lowered tone of her voice, Masachika sensed that she was a bit uncomfortable, so he continued to face forward and swim as hard as he could, even though his arm was slowly running out of energy. The awkward silence continued until they were over halfway back to shore. Right when he assumed his feet would be able to touch the ground, Maria's hand suddenly tightened around his.

"…? Masha? Is everything okay?"

He turned around while switching to the backstroke, but Maria did not reply to his call and instead continued to look over her shoulder at the water.

“Masha—”

“Eek!”

It was a tense but soft scream. She immediately let go of his hand and placed both of hers on the swim ring, kicking her legs while trying to lift herself up out of the floating device.

“Wh-what are you doing?! That’s extremely dangerous!” he warned in utter shock, but it was too late. The weight of her upper body was already pushing forward down on the swim ring, lifting the back side right up into the air before flipping Maria forward. There was a massive splash as Maria wildly kicked her legs in the air until inevitably sinking into the abyss.

“Huh?! A-are you—?!”

Two arms suddenly extended out from the water before wrapping themselves around Masachika’s neck. In the midst of his shock, Maria shot out of the water, her hair sticking to her forehead and cheeks, and clung to him for dear life.

“Wh-what are you—?!”

Maria’s cheek pressed up against his. Her squishy arms touched his neck and shoulders. And most notable of all, his chest and stomach were met with the incredibly soft, bare skin of her cleavage.

“……?!?!”

The extreme stimulation caused Masachika’s body to instantly start burning from within, but by then, the salt water was already rapidly approaching his mouth, so he started swimming in place again in a panic.

“J-jellyfish!”

“…?! Th-there’s a jellyfish?!”

After she screamed into his ear, his eyes darted around the water, where he did notice something semicircular and white floating, and he froze…but when he looked at it closer, it didn’t seem to be swimming on its own. If anything, it was helplessly rocking with the sea.

“…Hmm? Masha, that’s a plastic bag, not a jellyfish.”

“Huh? I-it’s just a plastic bag…?”

“Yeah…maybe…”

“Just ‘maybe’?!”

The ambiguity of his phrasing caused Maria to tightly wrap her loosening arms around him once more.

“Ack?! *Definitely!* That’s definitely a plastic bag!”

“Ааа! Помогиии! Она меня ужалила!”

“Wow! She speaks in Russian when she’s panicking!”

He was strangely impressed, unlike Maria, who was screaming in absolute horror. Masachika was panicking for his own reasons as well, though. Honestly, who could blame him?

Maria’s bare skin felt extremely hot, even in the cool ocean water. Soft. Just so soft…especially the mounds squished up against Masachika’s chest. Although her scent was mixed with the fragrance of suntan lotion, it filled his nostrils, which only made things harder.

*O-oh, gosh… I’m going to drown, aren’t I?!*

Drowning in her sweetly curved swellings of motherly love… would be nice, but he was genuinely talking about the ocean, which was slowly swallowing his body. The sense of danger promptly urged him to search for the swim ring, but it was floating a few meters away already and only continued to drift farther, perhaps due to Maria wildly kicking and splashing the water.

“I-it’s okay, Masha. Relax.”

“Я боюсь медуз! Са-кун, помогиии!”

Masachika placed a hand on her back to calm her down as she continued to shout even more. He desperately reached for the swim ring until eventually managing to reel it in, but right as he let out a sigh of relief…

“What are you two doing?” a nearby voice questioned in a fed-up manner. He looked over in the direction of the voice to find Chisaki, with goggles strapped around her forehead and rolling her eyes…and once he remembered he was being tightly embraced by Maria, the expression alone sent a chill down Masachika’s spine.

“Oh! Uh… This is… There was a jellyfish.”

“A jellyfish…? Oh.”

Chisaki wore a skeptical gaze as she examined the water around them, then she slowly reached out and picked something up.

“…You mean this?”

In her hand…was an actual jellyfish, not a plastic bag. A genuine jellyfish. Masachika instinctively braced himself as Maria’s arms around his neck tightened even more…which made Chisaki’s eyes roll even harder.

“You’re making a really big deal over nothing. It’s already dead.”

“Huh? I-it’s dead?”

It wasn’t moving now that she’d mentioned it. It was just…there, like a drooping pancake made out of jelly.

“I saw a few swimming nearby earlier and quickly disposed of them, but it looks like one of their bodies found their way over here,” she casually mentioned before indifferently tossing the jellyfish’s body to the side as if it were trash. What power.

“So? How long do you plan on hugging him, Masha?”

“Oh, u-uh…”

Maria awkwardly smiled, her eyes avoiding Chisaki’s chilling gaze.

“I can’t move my legs…”

“Did you pull a muscle?”

“Must have been a terrifying experience…”

Masachika’s eyes narrowed, and he sighed as he handed Maria the swim ring. Once he and Chisaki tugged the float back to shore together, Maria was finally able to walk on her own two feet through the sand, although with unsteady steps.

“I’m really sorry, Kuze. Thank you.”

“I’m just glad you’re okay. Anyway, I’m going to swim a little

longer."

He waved to Maria, who looked apologetic, then headed back to the deeper part of the waters…because there was no way he could get completely out of the water right now. Just use your imagination. He was a young, healthy teenager with urges like anyone his age.

CHAPTER 6

# I want to be a turtle.

“Hmm? Where did Alya go?”

After managing to cool off his head and whatnot in the ocean, Masachika returned to the beach, where he noticed that only the second-year students were there. He looked back and saw Yuki and Ayano walking out of the ocean with a large floatie, but Alisa was nowhere to be found.

“If you’re looking for Little Kujou, I just lent her a fishing rod, so she should be over by the rocks right about now.”

“A fishing rod? Huh… By the way, was I supposed to comment on this little art project you’re working on?”

Touya, who’d solved the mystery of the missing girl for Masachika, was being diligently buried by Chisaki. He was lying on his back while sand was continuously poured over him. Maria was even scribbling some sort of patterns in the sand around him for some godforsaken reason.

…What kind of ritual was this?

“…I’d appreciate it if you’d just act like you didn’t see anything.”

“…All right.”

Masachika could tell that whatever they were doing, he didn’t want to know, so he replied with a curt nod. When Yuki eventually made her way over, however, she stopped before the strange sight and pondered to herself for a few seconds before her face was overcome with astonishment. She leaned in toward her brother and whispered so

that only he could hear:

"Wait. Is that where the tentacles are going to come from?"

"No, he's not going to turn into Cthulhu like that."

"Interesting. So you're saying we have to sacrifice him to summon it, huh?"

"I'm not going to let you kill Touya."

"That looks like so much fun. Do you mind if I join you all?"

"Oh my. ♪ We would love for you to join us."

After smoothly ignoring his pleas, Yuki mirthfully began to draw (?) with Maria.

"What about you, Aya…no…?"

He turned around to see what his goofball sister's maid was going to do, only to discover that she wasn't there, so he looked around until he found her carrying Yuki's float back to the cottage. What a model servant.

"…"

With nothing to do, Masachika briefly considered his options and decided to head toward the rocky terrain where Alisa supposedly was. After sliding his flip-flops on under the beach umbrella, he walked along the sand toward the rocks, but the instant he tried to climb up them, his foot slipped, and he staggered.

"Whoa! The rocks are pretty slippery."

Not only were the rocks relatively fragile, but they were also covered in damp seaweed, making them as slick as ice. His rubber sandal soles offering almost zero grip weren't doing him any favors, either, so he needed to pay close attention to where he was going or risk falling.

He walked ever so carefully…until he eventually made it to the top of the rocky area, where it was flatter, and found Alisa at last.

"Oh! There she is. Hey! You catch anything yet?" he called out, approaching her…but one look at her scowl as she faced the sea said all he needed to know.

"…What?" Alisa asked.

"I just came to see how you were doing. That's all."

She didn't even glance in his direction, so he stopped, not wanting to ruin her concentration, and scratched his head while considering his options. He eventually decided to stay and watch the surface of the water with her to see if she'd get any bites, but the bobber stayed completely still for the following minute, and he slowly lost interest. His eyes began to idly wander until they randomly stopped on Alisa.

*Huh. Yuki was right. You really can see her ribs a little.*

He thought back to what his sister had said when he noticed Alisa's ribs faintly poking out from underneath her bikini. He then lowered his gaze a little more…and realized exactly why Yuki was surprised. Her waist was so thin that he could probably almost wrap his hands all the way around if he tried.

"What are you looking at?"

Alisa glared up at him with a chilling tone and icy stare. Despite having nothing but innocent admiration, he still felt guilty when his integrity was challenged. Thus is the life of a man.

"I was just thinking about how slim your waist was. That's all."

"Right."

By admitting he'd been staring at her waist, he was indirectly suggesting that he wasn't staring at her butt or even being a creep, but her reaction was still cold.

"Wouldn't you have figured that out already, since we danced together last year?"

"Last year…? Oh, at the school festival, right?"

He thought back to when they'd performed a folk dance (?) together on the night of the school festival, and merely remembering having his arms around her waist made him blush. He hadn't really thought much of it then, since it had been really dark, and he'd been busy trying to keep up with Alisa's dance moves. Now that he realized he'd had his hands around those hips, though, he recognized how bold his actions truly were.

"That was, uh… You know? …Anyway, actually seeing your waist really puts it into perspective," he awkwardly sputtered while trying not to make eye contact.

"…! Stop acting so weird. All we did was dance, right?"

Alisa leaned back as if she was a bit flustered as well.

"Yeah, uh… Ahem…! It was a rather original dance, to put it lightly. You know, thanks to someone getting a little too…competitive on their feet."

"That's because…you're the one who provoked me…"

She looked slightly awkward until she suddenly glared at Masachika and blushed for some reason.

"Just in case there was any doubt, I only let you touch me then because we were dancing. Try to touch me again, and you're dead. Got it?"

"I wouldn't even think of it. I don't just go around randomly

molesting people, you know?"

He raised his hands into the air in an attempt to prove he wasn't looking at her *like that*, but Alisa skeptically snorted, then quickly faced forward once more.

"I don't know what to believe…after seeing how long your eyes were glued on Masha's chest," she snapped with a prickly tone.

"Huh? No, uh… That's… That's just instinct. Men can't help it…"

"Touya didn't stare."

"I was surprised about that, too. He really is a gentleman," he replied with a straight face before realizing what he was saying and panicking once more.

"Oh, uh… Ahem. He is a gentleman, of course, but his girlfriend, Chisaki, was standing right next to him, so he couldn't let his eyes wander. Honestly, though, being compared with that is kind of unfair…"

The more he spoke, the worse things got, so he lowered his gaze a bit…when Alisa suddenly muttered softly in Russian:

"**<**We're partners, too.**>**"

A different kind of partner. So it would be great if she didn't confuse *partners in the election* with *romantic partners*.

"**<**So keep your eyes on me and only me.**>**"

*…Is she giving me permission to stare? At those incredible breasts?* he instinctively thought before almost instantly knocking some sense into himself. Alisa's Russian wasn't something one should take too seriously. She'd just glared cooly and said, *"What are you looking at?"* only a few moments ago. Probably only half— maybe one-third—of her Russian whispers were worth believing. "If you want to leer at someone like my sister, then you might as well just stare at me instead"—that was what she probably meant. She just loved her sister and was trying to protect her. Yep…

*Her sister did just wrap her arms around me in a bathing suit only a few moments ago, though…*

The conversation consequentially reminded him of his good luck (?) from earlier, so he shook his head and looked back toward the water.

"So…enjoying our beach vacation?"

He was trying to change the subject, but even he immediately couldn't believe the garbage that was coming out of his mouth. Although he'd said the first thing that came to mind, Alisa didn't seem to be weirded out by the question and nodded.

“I am… This is the first time I’ve ever gone anywhere like this with my friends before, so I’m having a lot of fun.”

“Really? By ‘friends,’ do you mean Yuki and Ayano?”

“…? Of course.” She gave another curious nod as if that much should have been obvious, but at the very least, it touched Masachika to hear that. His classmate, known as the solitary princess at school, had finally found two people she could confidently call friends, despite their eccentric nature. Alisa finally found someone whom she didn’t even hesitate to call a friend.

*She doesn’t hate people. She just keeps her distance from others so that she doesn’t hurt anyone, but in actuality, she’s an extremely kind, compassionate person.*

And it made Masachika surprisingly happy that she hadn’t shown that kindness to anyone but him. He unconsciously nodded to himself a few times while digesting that fact.

“Yeah… She is, huh? Heh…”

“What?”

“Nothing…”

He evaded her skeptical gaze, avoiding elaboration as well, then softly cleared his throat and announced:

“I have something I want to talk with you about, but it’s kind of serious. Is that okay?”

“…Sure.”

“It’s about the student council election. I put a lot of thought into it, and I considered that maybe we need to make some time to improve your social skills. I figured it’d be hard to get elected when even your supporters think you’re cold.”

“…”

In short, he was telling her indirectly that she was a rather unsociable person, and she fell silent. Perhaps having it pointed out to her was painful, especially since she already recognized this herself.

“But after thinking about it some more, I changed my mind. You don’t need to improve your social skills.”

His voice was like a warm flame within the dark sadness of Alisa’s silence. She looked back up at him doubtfully, and he held her gaze.

“You’ve shown that you’re perfectly capable of making friends in your own way without my help…and it’s really relieving to see. It honestly warms my heart.” He smiled bashfully. Alisa’s eyes shot away, and she quickly replied:

“…Yuki and Ayano are good people. That’s why.”

“So are you,” he replied without missing a beat. Alisa was once again at a loss for words. Her mouth opened a bit to almost reflexively deny it, but before she could even utter a word, Masachika added:

“And everyone in the student council has already realized that as well… Sayaka and Nonoa, too.”

“…”

“Just in case this wasn’t clear, I meant what I said at the closing ceremony. So many people would support you and cheer you on if they got to know you. That’s why…I think you’d really benefit from initiating the conversation and being more outgoing. You’re far more likable than you think.”

“…Uh-huh.”

She gave a small nod in response, but it was just followed by silence. Only the sounds of the waves could be heard as they faced forward together, gazing at the sea.

“**<**You too.**>**”

“Hmm?”

“…Nothing.”

As he watched her curiously, she shook her head softly and grew quiet once more. A melancholic air filled the void between them. *Maybe that wasn’t something I should have brought up during our vacation*, Masachika wondered.

“Anyway, it doesn’t look like you’re getting any bites. What are you using?” he asked, his voice a bit louder as he stretched in an exaggerated manner and eyed the bobber floating in the ocean.

“…What do you mean?” questioned Alisa, slightly raising an eyebrow and looking back up at him.

“For bait.”

“…Nothing.”

“Wait! You’re using a lure, then?! Isn’t that a little difficult for beginners? …Hold on. You are a beginner, right?”

“…Yes,” Alisa replied, a bit displeased.

“Uh… You can’t just wait for a bite if you’re using a fishing lure. You need to move it around a bit to make it look alive to trick the fish,” Masachika suggested, using only knowledge he’d gained from manga since he, too, was a beginner when it came to fishing.

“…Like this?”

“You have to move it a little more than that.”

“Why don’t you give it a try, then?”

With a slight pout, she held out the fishing rod, which he

reluctantly grabbed while whispering, “I’m a beginner, too…” He then thought back to when he saw famous people fish on TV and tried to mimic what they were doing. A good twenty seconds or so went by, when…

“Oh, I think I got a bite.”

“…?!”

Masachika gave the fishing rod a small tug as the line faintly vibrated. He immediately felt something pulling back, so he started rotating the handle to the reel right away. After a few seconds of struggling, a small horse mackerel suddenly shot out from the sea.

“…!”

“That’s one down! Heh! I’m afraid of my own talents sometimes.” He narcissistically smirked at Alisa’s wide eyes, but the instant he flipped the fish into the air and it was hanging over the rocky terrain… his smile suddenly froze.

“So, uh… What am I supposed to do with this?”

“Huh? J-just let it go.”

“But how?”

“‘But how?’ Just take the hook out of its mouth.”

“Yeah, and how am I supposed to do that?!”

His smile faltered, and he leaned away from the fish, which was wildly flopping around while dangling in the air on the line. After realizing he couldn’t do this without the use of both hands, he placed the fish along with the rod down onto the ground…where the fish continued to flop around. They edged back. It was one of those rare cases where both people were the sort who couldn’t touch fish that were alive.

“H-hurry up and save it already.”

“Huh? But…what if it bites me?”

“It isn’t going to bite you!”

“Really? Wait. Where am I even supposed to grab it?”

“Don’t look at me.”

They were helpless. But the fish was slowly approaching death, so Masachika softly stepped on its body to hold it down, apologizing in his mind the whole time. He then twisted the hook out of its mouth and scoop-launched it back into the sea.

“…I feel really bad now.”

“…”

The overwhelming guilt naturally spilled out of his mouth while he watched the fish descend. Alisa, clearly uncomfortable, apparently felt

the same way as well as she gazed at the sea.

"…Want to go back?"

"…Yes."

She seemed to have lost all interest in fishing any longer, despite still not having caught one herself. After making sure Masachika picked up the rod, she started to walk down the rocky terrain back to the beach. He promptly followed after her, but when they reached the slope, he warned:

"The rocks here are really slippery, so make sure to be careful when you—"

"Ah!"

"Alya?!"

The instant she started walking down, her sandal squeaked as her leg slipped forward, throwing her off-balance.

*…! If she falls on the rocks dressed like that…!*

A little scratch on the hand or knee would be fine. She just wouldn't be able to go in the ocean anymore. But if she fell in her current wear, with absolutely no cushioning, she could really injure herself on a sharp rock.

"…!!"

Sensing danger, Masachika immediately reached out with his left hand and wrapped it around Alisa's stomach as he tried to grab on to her from behind. Although she'd just told him a few minutes ago not to touch her, this was no time to be worrying about that.

But there were a few errors in his judgment. The first thing he didn't realize was that since they were both wearing nothing but bathing suits, his left hand had nothing to grab on to after he wrapped it around her side. The second was that their bodies were a lot slipperier now since they were covered in dried salt from the ocean and sand. The third…was that the rocky terrain under Alisa instantly collapsed when she slipped. Even though it was only the top layer of rock that shattered, it was still more than enough to knock Alisa completely off-balance.

"Ah!"

She began to fall at an extremely steep angle, but there was nothing she could use to catch herself, and the reduction of friction due to the salt and sand allowed her stomach to begin smoothly slipping out of Masachika's embrace.

"…?!"

Driven by the unparalleled sense of danger, Masachika threw the

fishing rod from his right hand and wrapped his right arm around her stomach as well, putting his weight into his heels while simultaneously looking for something to grab with his left hand.

*…! Her armpit!*

He immediately lifted his left arm straight up to stuff his hand in Alisa's armpit as he looked back to check the ground behind him.

*No sharp looking rocks here… Okay! This'll work!*

…Putting his hands under Alisa's armpits probably would be the optimal solution if his goal was to merely pick her up…but this was where he made his final blunder. He had forgotten that his hand would run into two large—very large—"obstacles" if his hand was sliding up the body of a woman.

*Hmm?*

The moment he lifted up his left hand, his thumb was absorbed into a soft substance before getting caught on something. And that *something* was easily lifted up in accordance with the momentum of his moving hand and her body, quickly guiding his hand over a soft mound of flesh as his finger got stuck under some string.

*Mmm?!*

Incidentally, he was still not completely sure what was happening, for he was overwhelmed by the unexpected sensation and was panicking because his left hand still hadn't reached her armpit. Although he was alarmed that his finger was stuck, he looked back once more to check for safety, then tightly grabbed on to *whatever* was in his left hand to make sure Alisa would be safe.

"Ouch!"

Alisa immediately yelped, but Masachika was in no position to concern himself over it as he clenched his teeth, falling backward along with Alisa.

"Oof!"

It was the result of pulling his weight back without considering all the consequences: His rear slammed right into the rocky terrain. Although he was prepared for some pain, his thin swimming trunks might as well have had no cushioning, because the sharp pang shot up through his tailbone all the way to his head, causing him to see stars. It didn't help that another human then fell into his lap, crushing his legs.

"Ouch! Mmm… You okay, Alya?"

He groaned through the unbelievable agony while lowering his gaze down at Alisa in his arms…when he finally realized exactly what

was happening. His right arm was firmly wrapped around her waist. So far, so good. Her rear and thighs were in his lap as well. This much was fine, too. Although her squishy, bare skin was tightly pressed against his, it was still not that big of a deal. The real problem was…

"…?!"

"Wh-what…?!"

…his left hand was firmly gripping Alisa's right breast. Bare skin was sticking to his palm as her chest yielded around his fingers and something poked the center of his palm.

"Sorry…!"

"Ah…!"

Masachika swiftly pulled his hand away the instant he realized what he was doing, shaking his thumb and index finger, which had been caught under her bikini and the string.

"…?!"

"…!!"

There was nothing left to the imagination anymore. It was only logical this would happen, since his hand had been hiding her chest in place of her bikini, which he'd accidentally pulled up earlier. Alisa screamed wordlessly and covered herself with both arms, thrashing about and staggering to her feet.

"Die, die, die!"

She then proceeded to kick the life out of Masachika's legs as she turned red with anger and embarrassment.

"Ouch! I'm sorry! Ack! I said I'm sorry!"

While she may have been wearing soft flip-flops, being kicked in the bare leg still hurt, especially with how much force she was putting into it. But he was completely at fault here, so all he could do was apologize. It may have not been a big deal if he had touched her over her clothes, but he'd slipped his hand under her bathing suit and groped her, albeit accidentally. The police would usually be called under normal circumstances. "This man right here, officer," they'd say.

"You idiot! Pervert! I said 'ouch'! Y-you squeezed as hard as you could, didn't you?!"

"I'm sorry! Ouch! I didn't— Ouch!"

It was as if saying it aloud herself made her even angrier and more embarrassed as she kicked his legs and stepped on them with tears welling in her eyes.

*Oink, oink! Yes, mistress! I deserve punishment!*

Absurd thoughts popped into his mind like he was becoming a

masochist under the relentless weight of her thighs, but Masachika was unfortunately not cultured enough to actually find joy in any of this. Instead, he was more eager for her to put her top back on than anything. While he did want her to get her rage out of her system, he was having an extremely hard time finding a place to look, since she was only covering her chest with her hands…and they weren't as hidden as she thought they were if you peeked up at them from below.

"Hff…! Hff… Hff…"

It was hard to tell if she was sobbing or growling as she looked down at him with tears in her eyes.

"Hey, uh… I'm sorry. I'm really sorry."

After he humbly apologized, Alisa swiftly turned on her heel, walked a few steps away from him, and crouched with her back turned to him.

"Hey, that… I didn't do it on pur—… No. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry…"

He stopped himself from making any pathetic excuses and apologized a few more times instead, but he didn't know what else to do after that as his eyes slowly wandered.

"…Masachika."

"Y-yes, ma'am?!"

"Turn around. I need to fix my swimsuit."

"Oh, okay…"

The hushed voice following the few seconds of uncomfortable silence filled him with unbelievable guilt as he did as he'd been told, sitting on his knees on the rocky terrain. But what exactly made this so painful for Masachika? Of course, the fact that he'd touched Alisa was depressing, but the most regrettable thing of all to him was the fact that he found himself feeling more excited than guilty. Before he even realized it, he was trying to remember the sensation, which only ended up making him feel disappointed in himself. It was his own lack of principles that pained him.

*Seriously, pull yourself together. Getting excited while wearing a pair of swimming trunks is a death sentence.*

He (believed he) could still feel her warmth on his left hand, though he hit his forehead and desperately tried to clear his mind of these worldly desires. He put a halt to every impure thought that popped into his mind…until devil Yuki appeared on his shoulder. "You squeezed them! You squeezed the unsqueezable E-cups! You swine!" she shouted until Masachika crushed her in his hand.

“**<**Responsibility…**>**”

He heard a frightening word from behind him. A word that makes any man’s heart skip a beat whenever he hears a woman say it. The single scariest (profound) word she could have said. Which she did in Russian. While whispering. And Masachika was no exception. His heart skipped a beat. In the bad kind of way.

*Responsibility for what? Touching her bare breasts? Do I have to be her boyfriend now? Do I have to ask her out?!*

Little-devil Yuki emerged through the inward shouts of despair. “Do her. Do her. Do her,” she urged. Masachika, annoyed with her, squished her again.

*Hmm… Relax. It’s gonna be okay. I don’t even know what she’s talking about, and she might not be serious anyway. Am I serious whenever I say something nerdy? No. I just like joking around with a straight face, and I’m sure Alya just mutters in Russian whatever random thought that pops into her head, so—*

“**<**You better take responsibility…and marry me.**>**”

*…?! I said relax! Everyone here needs to relax!*

The incomparable destructive force behind those words transformed Masachika’s light head taps to furious rubbing against his temples.

*Mmm…! Calm down, Masachika. This just proves my hypothesis from a few seconds ago. Alya of all people wouldn’t say something like that unless it was a joke, right? She was just joking in Russian like she—*

“**<**I’ve never let anyone touch me there…**>**”

“I’ve never let anyone” **+** “touch me” **+** “there”—the three-hit combo pierced Masachika’s heart from each angle before the large boulder of *responsibility* came crashing down and defeated him. Tiny imaginary chicks circled his head like stars while little-devil Yuki chanted: “Second base! Second base! Masachika skipped first base and went straight to second!” She wildly kicked her bowlegs with glee. *She’s really starting to piss me off. Is there really no way to get rid of her?* he thought.

“**<**I’ve never…shown anyone before…!**>**”

The already-stunned mental image of Masachika was grabbed and thrown on his head, instantly killing him. All he could do after hearing her strained voice tremble in Russian was clutch his head and squat while curling forward into a ball. In the meantime, the little-devil Yuki was clutching her stomach and cackling in his mind, but he didn’t even have the mental capacity to care anymore. *I am a turtle. I am nothing*

*but a sea turtle who made the mistake of leaving the ocean, so now I must go back.*

"*Sigh…* Masa— Masachika?!"

When Alisa eventually stood back up, she turned in Masachika's direction to discover him curled up in a ball and slowly rolling toward the edge of the rocky terrain. Her eyes opened wide.

"…?! What are you doing?"

"…I figured I'd purify myself. A good old-fashioned ablution."

"You what? *Sigh…* Just stop and stand up. I'm getting secondhand embarrassment."

Secondhand embarrassment. It was overkill—like kicking a dead body just for the hell of it. He stood sluggishly, clearly despairing, which made Alisa's brow furrow with both rage and bewilderment. Her eyes wandered for a few seconds before she spoke up as if to cast aside any doubts she had:

"Ugh! I'm only telling you this because I don't want things to be awkward, so…first, I want to thank you for saving me. Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

"Oh, uh… I'm fine."

"…Good. Also, I want to apologize for kicking you, too. But it's only natural you were punished for touching my ch-chest, right? I know you didn't do it on purpose, though."

“Yeah… I’m really sorry about that…”

“Good… Give me your left hand.”

“…? Here.”

Masachika obediently extended his left arm as she glared at him with red cheeks. After holding his left hand in hers, she used her right to mercilessly pinch the back of his hand.

“…! Ow, ow, ow, ow?!”

“And this is your punishment…! For looking at my you-know-whats!” Alisa shouted, putting even more force in the twist before letting go. “There! It’s over! What just happened doesn’t matter anymore! Got it?”

“Yes…”

“Good. Now, come on. Let’s go back,” she softly said as she began to walk away, avoiding eye contact. This time, she made sure to carefully descend the rocky terrain and head to the sand. Masachika picked up the fishing rod and followed after her dejectedly with his head hanging. After making their way to the sandy part of the beach, they continued to walk for a while until Alisa looked diagonally back at Masachika, who was still trudging along with a dark rain cloud over his head, and she pouted.

“**<**It’s nothing to be that depressed about.**>**”

With a jolt, Masachika lifted his head up slightly at the sound of the unexpected Russian whisper. That was when he noticed she had a hand on her chest and was seemingly in a bad mood for some reason as she glanced in his direction.

“**<**What’s your problem? Was there something weird…about my breasts?**>**”

*There was absolutely nothing weird. Thank you for the wonderful, valuable experience. You have enough boob to fit in one hand and then some. Incredible. I wish I were dead.*

Even now, his mind continued to wildly wander in the vilest directions, reinforcing that wish. The chivalry imbedded in his mind when he lived at the Suou residence as a kid was wrestling with his consciousness.

“…! I can’t take this any longer!”

Alisa turned around in irritation and glared at Masachika, whose arms were crossed and head still hung.

“I said what happened back there doesn’t matter anymore! So don’t you think it’s rude to me to still be moping around like that?!”

“…?! Oh. Right.”

To Masachika, hearing the words *rude to me* was like waking up in a panic after dozing off.

“Stand up straight!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

His spine immediately straightened at the sharp sound of her voice. After he nodded back at her stern gaze, Alisa stood next to him and slapped his back.

“Come on. Get moving.”

“Ow! …You got it.”

She glared at him as he unconsciously smiled at her “masculine behavior,” and he began to explain himself in a fluster once more.

“Oh, no. This is… I was just thinking about how open-minded you were…”

“…Hmph.”

With a pout, Alisa looked away from his forced smile. She then began fidgeting with her hair and whispered:

“**<**You’re still going to have to take responsibility…**>**”

*What does that even mean?*

The life in Masachika’s eyes died as he stared up into the vast summer sky, puzzled by her quick change from masculine to innocent young girl.

CHAPTER 7

# They were floating, man.

“Ah, I feel like a new woman!” Chisaki exclaimed after having washed off the salt water and suntan lotion. She then excitedly rushed over to the bathtub and placed her feet in the water, her eyes narrowed with pure bliss.

“Nothing beats a hot bath after a swim in the ocean.” She smiled euphorically as she slid into a large bathtub big enough to fit around six people.

“You can say that again. ♪ It’s like I’m at a fancy resort ♪, ” Maria agreed, washing her body off as well. While this was the Kenzaki cottage’s bathroom, it wasn’t like any ordinary bathroom. Not only did it have a door that led to the inside, but it also had a door that led to the outside world, too, letting you wash off right after playing in the ocean. Thanks to that, everyone was able to rinse off the salt water almost immediately, so they didn’t have to worry about being itchy or feeling gross later.

“There is no better reward after a fight than a warm bath. Ahhh, I feel refreshed already.”

“Oh my? A fight? Do you mean with the jellyfish?”

“No, with two sharks.”

“You’re so wild. ♪”

However, there were “only” three showers, so all five of them couldn’t bathe at once and had to take turns. Chisaki and Maria actually offered to wait so that the first-year students could go ahead,

but they declined—especially Yuki, who claimed that it would take them far too long to wash off, since they all had really long hair. Chisaki and Maria also figured that the first-year students would try to rush instead of relaxing if they went before the others, so they decided to take the lead. Incidentally, the two guys in the group had already quickly rinsed off in the shower and were done. It was their way of being gentlemen.

"Excuse me? Could we come in?" Yuki's voice echoed from the other side of the door leading outside.

"Oh, be our guest ♪, " Maria replied, having finished.

"Thank you."

The three first-year students stepped into the room right as Maria descended into the tub. Each of them removed their bathing suits and placed them on the top rack, where the soap and the like were.

"…"

Quietly, Yuki stared hard at the freshly removed bathing suits, which were of all different shapes and colors and lying next to bottles of shampoo and body wash.

*How…lewd.*

There stood an example of an old man in a young gentlewoman's body. After the creep nonchalantly chose the shower in the middle, she proceeded to stare at Alisa's naked body out of the corner of her eye.

*Whoa…*

It was incredible. She could tell Alisa had a nice body when she had clothes on, but without clothes—phenomenal. Yuki almost audibly gasped at the nude work of art, and her ladylike mask nearly came off.

*Ack! I've got to stop staring, or Masha and Chisaki are going to notice.*

Yuki looked forward once more before glancing in the mirror to check if anyone else was staring…

*Wow… They've got some nice goods themselves.*

Her eyes instantly locked on their naked bodies in the mirror. Like…if you added their muscle mass with the amount of fat they had, then divided by two, you would have the perfect body. They both had extraordinary bodies but in contrasting ways.

*It's like one's from a rom-com, and the other's from some adventure-fantasy world…*

After Yuki nerdily evaluated Maria's fat-in-all-the-right-places body and Chisaki's ripped figure, she began drying off her wet hair with a towel, when…

"Lady Yuki, shall I wash your back?" Ayano asked suddenly with

her own hair neatly put up in a hair clip.

"Hmm? I am fine, Ayano…"

"…? Lady Yuki?"

When she casually looked in Ayano's direction and saw her body…

*Ah… What a comforting sight…*

But that was a thought she kept to herself.

◇

"Ah."

"Hmm?"

Right as Masachika stepped out of the living room and into the hallway to go to the bathroom, Yuki and Ayano coincidentally left the bathroom at the same time, and their eyes met. After Yuki promptly checked her surroundings, she handed something in a plastic bag to Ayano and whispered what seemed to be orders to her. Entrusted with her master's will, Ayano swiftly but silently peeked inside the living room, then checked the second floor as well. Once finished, she made an okay gesture with her fingers from above, which immediately curled Yuki's lips into a genuine grin.

"Bro, bro, bro," she repeated, scuttling over to his side.

"What?"

Masachika got just a bit of a bad feeling in his gut, and he smiled uncomfortably, but he decided to hear her out. Yuki then stood slightly on her tiptoes and whispered into his ear:

"I just saw some huge tits floating."

"I knew you were going to say something like that!"

He sandwiched his hands around her head after hearing the not-so-unexpected garbage that spewed from her mouth and prepared to give her the worst noogie of her life, when he suddenly looked down at her with a serious expression.

"Whose were they?"

"Alya's and Masha's. And they were perfectly shaped, too. I'm talking perfect hemispheric—?!"

"I didn't ask you to tell me all that."

He grinded the base of his palm against her temples, and she yelled, "Ahhh?! Pretty unreasonable to ask me only to silence me once I start giving details!"

"You're unbelievable…"

After squeezing his sister's head for five or so seconds, he let go

with an exhausted look on his face.

"Ouch, bro… It was the highlight of my evening and a sight to see, and all I wanted was to share the joy with you. That's it," she snapped venomously, rubbing her temples.

"'It was the highlight'? I know I shouldn't be saying this, but don't you get the chance to see stuff like that all the time? Like during school trips?"

"I mean, I do—kind of, but they had these massive knockers that were like nothing I've ever witnessed before, especially compared with the average Japanese person. It's hard to describe what made them actually different besides size, but…yeah. They were something else."

"Are you sure you guys aren't just too skinny? Just spitballing ideas here."

"Those two are just as skinny. They have these tiny waists, but their asses are firm, and they don't sag, despite their colossal sizes. It has got to be the shape of the pelvis. That's all I can come up with."

"Okay, I don't care."

But Yuki was staring off into the distance as if she didn't even notice her brother's cold gaze.

"Grandpa told me a long time ago: Real big breasts are the ones that float in water."

"The hell is wrong with that old man?"

"He also said that hair without hair whorls and boobs that don't change shape when lying down are fake."

"He just loved cramming useless information into your head, huh?"

"Heh-heh-heh. Don't worry, kid. I can vouch for them: Those two were the real deal. Genuine and au naturel."

"I don't care."

"Uh-huh. Suuure you don't. Besides, what they had was more beautiful than anything man-made. But the way they jiggled, their texture—those were real. They looked so soft, to boot."

She gave him an energetic thumbs-up with an unnecessarily smug grin.

"You had to have been a middle-aged, pervy man in a past life."

He glared at her with a disgusted gaze, but deep down inside, he was thinking, *Yeah, you could say that again…* He did get to experience them "firsthand" only a little earlier, after all.

*…! Ack. No. Bad, Masachika.*

He promptly put the lid back on his memories before he could

remember anything else, but it was already too late. His sister was sharp. Too sharp. And she could read her brother like a book.

"By the way, my dear brother, did something happen between you and Alya?"

She gazed up at him skeptically.

"What do you mean?"

Masachika tried to play it cool like his life depended on it, looking vaguely curious in response to her sharp observation.

"A man and a woman wearing nothing but swimsuits…hidden within the dark shadows of the rocky grotto on the beach. There's no way something *wouldn't* happen." Yuki nodded with a knowing grin, her arms crossed.

"Whatever you're imagining, it didn't happen. And there was no grotto. Just a bunch of rocks out in the open."

"Oh? Then that means that something else—"

"No. Nothing," he denied, cutting his sister off. She still continued to stare with the most curious of gazes, but she simply replied, "Oh, okay," and easily accepted his response without question. "By the way, I have some great news for you, bro."

"Hmm?"

"Alya's all alone in the bathtub right now."

"I ain't gonna peep on her."

"I ain't suggestin' ya do."

Yuki looked as if she was overcome with surprise by his reaction while she placed a hand on her hip.

"Who do you think I am?"

"I think you are my beloved sister, and the most important person in the world to me."

"Ah. ♡ I wuv you, too ♡," she sweetly assured, immediately throwing her arms around him.

"What is this? A two-panel comic?"

He peeled his sister off him with an exhausted expression as he urged her to finish what she was saying.

"So…? Go on."

"Mmm… It's simple, really."

Yuki then lowered her already soft voice and cupped her right hand over her mouth, whispering:

"Wouldn't you like to see Alya right out of the bath?"

"…!"

"Wouldn't you like to see her slightly flushed skin—her somewhat

damp hair?"

They were like the devil's whispers. Yuki drew back without even waiting for a response, then passed by Masachika and patted him on the shoulder.

"But you're free to do whatever you want. Oh, just to let you know: I'll be keeping Touya busy, and Ayano will be keeping Masha and Chisaki busy, so nobody is going to be in this vicinity for a while…meaning you're free to do *whatever* you want."

She left her brother with those words before disappearing into the living room. Masachika proceeded to look up at the second floor, where he saw Ayano step inside the room Chisaki and Maria were staying in.

"…"

He stood stock-still in silence for a few seconds, then he started heading to the toilet once more as originally planned.

*Yuki's such a nerd that she lets her imagination run wild sometimes. What am I going to do with her?*

After finishing business, he sighed at his sister's nerdy need to try out every anime trope possible while they were there.

*What was she thinking, though? Of course I'm not going to be like, "Well, don't mind if I do," just because she arranged all that. Young teenage boys in puberty are shy. Clearly, they're going to do everything they can to pretend like they're not interested.*

Once he washed his hands, he went to the second floor and shook his head with another sigh.

*But, well…*

However, the instant he passed the last step, he froze with a smug grin and turned around.

*…as a fellow nerd, it would be wrong of me not to see this event through!*

He hid at the top of the staircase and waited for Alisa to arrive so he could pretend to run into her and say, "Oh, hey. Enjoy your bath?" Could he be blamed, though? He was an otaku before he was a teenage boy! He couldn't help it!

◇

"Why…? Huh? Why?"

Meanwhile, Alisa, who was alone in the changing room after her bath, was stricken with panic and bewilderment. The girls had been

getting out of the bath in pairs because the changing room wasn't that big and there was only one hair dryer. Therefore, Alisa stayed, as she often took relatively long baths, while Yuki and Ayano had left first. But when she eventually did decide to stand to dry off and change… she was stunned. Before going outside for a swim, she'd left a plastic bag with a change of clothes in the changing room…which happened to be absent of any kind of underwear, even though her shorts and shirt were still there.

"Huh? I brought underwear. I know I put a change of underwear in this bag…didn't I?"

No matter how many times she recalled everything she did, she clearly remembered putting underwear in the plastic bag. And yet in reality, there was no underwear inside. She hung on to the sliver of hope that they were somewhere on the floor and searched the changing room, but she couldn't find them at all.

"I can't believe it… Did I really forget? Did I drop them on the way here? But…"

Wrapped only in a towel and clutching her head, she seemed to have come to the conclusion that she'd messed up somehow. The fact that she never thought that someone was pranking her and stole them showed just how innocent she was. Even if she did consider the possibility, she surely would have immediately rejected the idea, since she was oblivious to a certain someone's true nature.

"What am I going to do now?"

She could do without the bottom half. It would be uncomfortable, but she'd be able to bear through it until she got to her room. The problem was the top half. It would be obvious. It would stick out like a sore thumb. It was only a ten-second jog to her room, but if she was to run into someone before she got there…especially one of the two guys, she would die. No exception.

*Masachika already saw just a little while ago, but still…!!*

The situation reminded her of the accident from earlier, turning her cheeks bright red.

"Mmm…!!"

She slid her hands down her head to cover her face, squeezing her bangs tightly between her fingers. She'd told Masachika himself not to worry about it anymore, and she had been working really hard not to think about it, but…it was hopeless the moment she remembered what happened. Alisa always had her guard up. It was to the point that people might have considered her uptight or fastidious. She was proud

to not rely on others and stand on her own two feet, so to her, submitting or committing herself to someone was no different from admitting defeat. Dating, of course, was out of the question. Just imagining herself depending on, flirting with, and desiring to be loved by someone made her skin crawl.

Her thoughts on the matter had changed recently, but this was how she genuinely felt only a year ago. That was why she always kept her guard up and would make sure to sternly reject any man who casually tried to hit on her…which was part of why she almost made it a habit to let her guard down in front of a certain someone of the opposite sex by whispering in Russian. It was a thrill like nothing she had ever experienced before, but that was another story.

At any rate, she wasn't going to let any player touch a single strand of hair on her head, and if anyone tried, she would relentlessly knock their hand away. Whoever persisted even after that was slapped. There were never any openings in her guard, just like a real princess. And yet…

"Mmmmmmaaagrrrrrr!"

…he'd touched her. Not only touched but grabbed. He'd grabbed her bare chest. And to top it all off, he saw everything. After calmly thinking about it, she realized that he'd also wrapped his arms around her bare stomach and sat her in his lap. They had to get married now. He was going to have to dedicate the rest of his life to her to take responsibility for what he had done.

"Hff! Hff! It was an accident… It was an accident…"

She put a lid on her sense of virtue, stopping herself from obsessively repeating that they had to get married, but no matter how many times she tried to persuade herself, it was still something she couldn't let go. If it was some guy whom she didn't know, she would have punched him until he forgot what happened, then slammed her head on the ground until she forgot what happened as well.

It was unforgivable. She couldn't let him get away with it…and yet she'd almost surrendered herself to him when she was in his arms. His muscular arm tightly wrapped around her stomach, and his hard, large body pressed against her back—her heart had raced wildly, and she'd had a hard time breathing. That was why she couldn't immediately start moving again after falling. And there was something surprisingly comforting about being held from behind—

"No!"

Alisa verbally dismissed her own thoughts. There was no way she

would ever open herself up to someone after that happened. There was no way her heart would ever race just because someone helped her a little. It wasn't like she was a protagonist in one of those girly comics Maria loved. She wasn't some weak little princess whose heart easily throbbed because some guy saved her. She was simply confused due to something unexpected happening. She panicked. She was confused, she froze, and her heart malfunctioned. That was it, she believed.

"…Maybe I shouldn't forgive him."

Thinking deeply about it only made her feel her pride and dignity as a woman had been damaged in some way. She took back what she'd said earlier and began to seriously consider (physically) erasing Masachika's memories, but that would have to be put on hold. Right now, she had to think of how she was going to get herself out of this mess. Her predicament hadn't changed. She still had no underwear, and she was in danger.

"…"

She reset for the time being and started racking her brain for ways to get out of this unscathed. The safest method would be to wait for one of the other girls to walk by and ask them to bring her a pair of underwear. She would no longer have to risk having someone catch her with no bra on, but even that was still pretty embarrassing. It'd be a memory she would cringe about years later, and it would make her look like an idiot. Plus, it would inconvenience whomever she asked… which meant her only other option was risking it all and running to her room.

*Yuki and Ayano should be in our room already, though, right? But if they're not, I can change there, and if they are, I can just grab my underwear and change in the half bath, I guess? It won't be easy…but I don't have any other options!*

Regardless of her decision, she was out of time. Someone would surely start to wonder and check up on her if she waited any longer. Therefore…

"…Let's do this!"

After making up her mind, she put on her shorts and shirt over her bare skin, then quickly dried her hair before stuffing her towel and bathing suit into the plastic bag.

"…Maybe I could just hide my chest with this?"

Once the thought came to mind, she clutched the bag with both arms, but…it looked really unnatural. Maybe she could just take the towel out, but now her bikini was clearly visible through the thin

plastic bag, and that was embarrassing as well. Plus, holding a wet towel against your chest was icky in general. Yep. That was all this was. She didn't just discover she was an exhibitionist. Not at all. Nope.

"…It'll be okay. I just need to go back to my room without being seen," Alisa muttered to herself before she lifted the plastic bag with her right hand, slowly opened the sliding door, and peeked out into the hallway. After making sure there was nobody coming from each side of the hallway, she suddenly heard Yuki and Touya talking in the living room, and she mentally celebrated.

*Yesss! If Yuki's in the living room, then that means Ayano is there with her! And if the president is there, then Masachika should be as well… Yes, I can do this!*

Alisa dashed out of the changing room, thrilled to discover that her biggest fear was gone. She prayed that nobody would leave the living room while she climbed the stairs to the second floor…when she suddenly heard a voice coming from above.

"Oh, Alya. Can I talk with you about something?"

Her head went blank.

◇

"…? Alya…? What's wrong?"

"Noth…ing…"

Masachika casually started to walk down the stairs with his "what a coincidence" expression, but he almost immediately felt something was wrong when he saw how uncomfortable Alisa seemed. Her downcast eyes were restlessly wandering about as she fidgeted with the dirty towel–filled plastic bag in her hands.

She was wearing a plain shirt and simple shorts, which would make some people look like a bum, and yet it mysteriously looked really fashionable on her. Perhaps she seemed badass because she didn't care how she looked?

*Dammit… Good-looking people can do anything and get away with it…*

He keenly felt that, shooting her a questioning look as he descended the stairs, when all of a sudden…

*Hmm?*

His eyes were naturally guided up from the plastic bag in her hands, and he froze. Furrowing his brow, he looked once more…and then a third time…before smoothly redirecting his gaze and looking

straight up into the air. He thereupon screamed in his head as hard as he could:

*Why isn't she wearing a braaaaaaaaa?!*

An image of Yuki sticking her tongue out and winking suddenly manifested in his mind. Even with absolutely zero evidence, he had no doubt it was her doing.

*Yukiiiiiiii!!*

His sister's words from earlier suddenly began to play back in his head: *"It was the highlight of my evening and a sight to see, and all I wanted was to share the joy with you. That's it."*

*This is not how you share!!*

He inwardly shouted with rage again, clenching his teeth with his eyes still looking straight up. It was seeing him like this when Alisa finally realized that he had noticed.

"Hey."

"Huh? Huh?!"

Grabbing him by the wrist, she suddenly began dragging him to the second floor while he awkwardly stumbled behind, missing a step or two on the way. She ended up taking him to the room the first-year girls were staying in.

"Lie down right there."

"…What?"

"Just do it!" she sharply demanded, pointing at the bed.

"Yes, ma'am!"

Masachika jumped. Although he was uncomfortable due to the no-boys-allowed atmosphere of the room, he timidly climbed into the bed and hesitantly lay down on his back…when he suddenly heard the door being locked.

"A-Alya?"

"…"

He'd lifted his head and called out to Alisa, who was standing in front of the door, but she didn't say a word. She turned around, covering her chest with her right arm, and slowly approached. Without saying a word, she climbed onto the bed and *straddled* Masachika's stomach.

"U-uh…?"

"…"

A locked room. Two teenagers of the opposite sex in bed together. While this would seem like a very lewd situation to most people, there was something ominous about Alisa's downcast gaze that caused his

heart not to race but to shrink with fear.

"Masachika…"

"Y-yes?"

She finally opened her mouth and slowly lifted her head, revealing a threatening half smirk. Her entire face was illuminated with a burning crimson hue. She looked down at him with glassy eyes, and only her lips were curling into a stiff smile.

*I'm starting to feel a sense of déjà vu. Ohhh, something just like this did happen only a little earlier today. Ha-ha*, he thought, trying to preoccupy his mind as if he was attempting to escape reality.

"I'm sorry. I want to apologize in advance for what's about to happen," Alisa announced in between her irregular breathing.

"F-for what—?"

"I know. I understand that it's not your fault. You didn't do anything wrong, and I get that. But I need to vent these emotions that I can't contain any longer. Do you think you could be that outlet?"

Her voice trembled, making it clear that she was struggling to suppress these overflowing emotions. Masachika briefly looked up at the ceiling…and prepared himself.

"Sure, I've got you. We are partners, after all." *Plus, this was my stupid sister's fault.*

He gave her the thumbs-up while keeping the last part to himself.

"Thank you," she softly replied before immediately…

"Hmph!"

"Mmm!"

The entire world before his eyes was erased as a pillow covered his face, followed by suppressed grunts of rage paired with a violent air strike pulverizing said pillow.

"Hmph! Hnnn!"

Two, three—the missiles only continued to drop. She seemed to be slapping the pillow over his face, but…

*…It doesn't really hurt at all.*

There wasn't much power behind each slap in spite of how loud her grunts were. She was probably holding back since she was a guest here, and this wasn't her pillow. Plus, she was avoiding hitting where Masachika's face was, to boot. The strikes perfectly hit only the sides of the pillow, so he hardly felt any pain.

"Nnng! Mn!"

"…"

And once he got used to it, he started to focus on Alisa's butt

sitting on his stomach.

*I-I'm sure there's a fetish for whatever this is called.*

Every slap made it jiggle over him, gradually making him feel funny. They say that your other senses heighten whenever you close your eyes, and it seemed like that was true in this case. Masachika clenched his teeth under the pillow while Alisa's butt danced on his stomach and the bed made an absurdly loud creak.

*Gaaaaaah!! Hurry up and finish already!!*

He begged for the torture to end but not because it was painful. Perhaps his wishes were heard. Because after a few seconds went by, the attacks stopped, and only Alisa's frantic panting could be heard. Silence followed. As Masachika emptied his mind, Alisa pushed against the creaking bed, climbing off as if she had finally managed to get her emotions under control. However, Masachika still didn't move an inch.

"Hey, uh…Masachika? Are you okay?" she called out to him from the edge of the bed.

"…Yeah, perfectly fine," he replied in a voice as if he was suppressing a myriad of problems. After all, he wasn't exactly "fine," but it was because of a different reason from what she was thinking. Alisa sounded like she was almost trembling uncomfortably, perhaps feeling she had overdone it when…

*Hmm?*

He suddenly felt light pressure pressing down on the pillow around where his nose was, making him wonder what this never-felt-before sensation could be.

"**<**I'm sorry.**>**"

But Alisa immediately removed her hand (?), muttered something in Russian, and took the pillow off his face. Masachika turned away from the blinding light while slowly sitting up. After blinking until his eyes adjusted, he looked over at Alisa, who was now holding the pillow to her chest with an uncomfortable expression.

"I… I'm sorry… I'm okay now."

"O-oh. Well, I'm glad you feel better. Like, uh… It didn't hurt at all, so don't worry about it, okay?"

"O-oh…"

"Y-yeah… Anyway, I'll see you later…and I don't care at all, so you don't need to worry about a thing, either."

"…Okay."

He decided to leave immediately, partly since she seemed so uncomfortable that she was shaking, and promptly unlocked the door

before leaving the room, not once looking back.

"Phew… I'm exhausted." He sighed, closing the door with his hands behind his back…when he suddenly felt someone watching him, and he reflexively looked to his side.

"Ah…"

"…? Chisaki? What's wrong?"

Masachika wondered about the sight. Chisaki was poking her head out from the neighboring room, but her gaze slowly wandered toward the ceiling and appeared troubled.

"I, uh… I heard some noise, so…?"

"Some noise…?"

His brow furrowed…and then it hit him. She was talking about the creaking bed, Alisa's muffled voice, and the sound of a man unlocking the door and leaving once the creaking and grunting stopped.

"It's not what you think!" he yelled—practically shrieked.

Although he was denying what she was most likely thinking, there was no way he could tell her that Alisa was actually straddling him while slapping a pillow over his face. Therefore, he racked his exhausted brain for anything he could say to clear the misunderstanding other than the bizarre truth.

◇

"Alya? I'm coming in. ♪"

During Masachika's desperate attempt to explain himself, Maria somehow quietly left her room and snuck right by him. She opened the door to the first-year students' room and let herself in before even waiting for a reply. There, she found Alisa curled up on the bed with a pillow in her arms.

"Oh my. What's wrong? …Did something happen?" she asked, taking a seat on the edge of the bed. However, Alisa only stuffed her face in her pillow without saying a word. Maria asked once more:

"Did Kuze do something to you?"

"…"

Alisa still didn't reply but instead looked away as if to say, "I don't want to talk about it." Maria's expression immediately turned grim, and her fists clenched.

"I want you to tell me if he did anything to you that made you uncomfortable, because I'll talk to him if you need me to."

"…That's not it," Alisa finally replied, perhaps worried that

Masachika would be unfairly blamed for something if she remained silent. “Masachika didn’t do anything wrong. It’s just…”

“Just what?”

“…”

“Hmm?”

Alisa glanced up at her sister, who was gently encouraging her to elaborate, then quickly looked away and muttered:

“It was all an accident. I made a little mistake…and he ended up seeing something very embarrassing. That’s all.”

It was an abstract response, but Maria instinctively understood that her sister was embarrassed *as a woman* and not as a perfectionist who’d made a mistake in front of someone. And that was why Maria spoke with a more cheerful tone and exclaimed:

“Oh, it was an accident… That’s great! You’re really lucky it was Kuze!”

“Huh…?”

“If it was an accident, then it could have been anyone here, right? It could have been the student council president.”

The instant she said that, Alisa’s face twisted with disgust. Maria inwardly laughed a bit at her easy-to-read reaction and continued:

“It could have been someone you didn’t even know, so in a way, you’re kind of lucky it was the guy you’re closest with, right?”

“We’re not that close…”

“Hmm? You definitely are.”

“There just aren’t any other guys I get along with, so he wins by default. That’s all…,” muttered Alisa, burying her mouth in her pillow.

“Even then, you still trust him more than any other man, right?” Maria added sweetly.

“…”

“Then everything should be okay. Besides, I believe Kuze is the kind of guy who will go out of his way to make sure you’re comfortable. ♪”

“…I know that.”

Alisa finally sat up, seemingly a bit annoyed by Maria’s know-it-all way of speaking, and gave her sister a sharp look.

“I don’t want you getting the wrong idea, either. I trust Masachika, and I consider him a friend, but nothing more.”

“Oh my. ♪ Really?”

“Really. So don’t let your imagination run wild. Mom’s already been acting weirdly excited, so I don’t need any more aggravation.”

“Oh, she did meet him during the parent-teacher conference, huh? I remember her being thrilled that you finally had a male friend.”

“She has been grinning every time I’ve gone over to Masachika’s house during summer break, too…even though it’s just to do homework.”

“Hmm… But you’re all alone with him at his house, right? I don’t think people usually do that unless they’re really close.”

“That’s…! That’s because…I’ve never had any close male friends before, so I’m not sure how I’m supposed to act…”

Her voice slowly trailed off as she averted her gaze, causing Maria’s face to light up with a smile.

“You’re so cute, Alya.”

“…! Tsk.”

“Just continue being yourself. ♪ Ah! I’m not even going to let Kuze have you!”

“Hey?! Stop!”

Alisa used the pillow to shield herself from her sister’s embrace and pushed her back until Maria eventually slipped off the bed.

“Come on, Alyaaa. What’s wrong with a little sisterly love?” Maria pouted after taking a few steps back.

“We’re not kids anymore.”

“Hugging and expressing love for family are still important.”

“We kiss each other on the cheek whenever we greet. Isn’t that enough?”

“Ngh!”

She glared at her sister, but Alisa refused to even glance in her direction—as if she didn’t care in the least. After a few seconds went by, Maria looked away as well before briskly walking to the door.

“Hmph. ♪ If Alya’s going to be a jerk, then I’ll just have Kuze cheer me up,” she complained, whispering audibly so her sister would hear.

“…Go ahead.”

Alisa’s eyebrow slightly rose, but she dismissed her sister’s so-called threat.

“Okay, I think I will, then,” Maria replied childishly as she left the room. She then leaned against the door in the empty hallway and whispered:

“…I really am going to have him cheer me up.”

She seemed like a completely different person as she looked back over her shoulder. Her expression was far more mature yet somewhat sorrowful as well. Nevertheless, after but a brief sigh, her brilliant

smile immediately returned. She opened the door to her room, when…

"I-it's fine. You don't have to lie to me…"

"I'm not. We really—"

"Chisaki? How much longer do you plan on torturing him like that? Alya said nothing happened. *Sigh.* You're so dirty, Chisaki. ♪ Get your mind out of the gutter. ♪"

"Wh-what?! *Me*?!"

And just like that, Maria came to Masachika's rescue with her usual radiant smile.

CHAPTER 8

# It's some kind of (sleeping) prank?

"Kuze, psst. Come here."

After brushing his teeth before bed, Masachika started heading back to his room, when Maria suddenly stopped him. Turning around, he saw that she was poking her head out from her room, which she and Chisaki were sharing on the second floor, and waving him over.

"…? You need something?"

"Just come here."

"Huh? But…"

The door opened before he could even express his apprehension, revealing a room not much different from the one he and Touya were staying in. There was a large bed on each side with a window in the middle. Under the window stood a small table and two chairs.

"Come in. Hurry."

"Okay…"

Although he was curious why Chisaki wasn't there, he stepped foot into the room as requested, where…

"…?!"

…he suddenly saw their bathing suits hanging up to dry, causing him to look away in a panic…but when he saw Maria, he bent backward in surprise once more.

*She's in her freakin' pajamas!*

And they were summer pajamas, meaning the fabric was really thin. The light cherry blossom–colored pajamas perfectly outlined her

gorgeous body, and while her skin was hardly exposed, there was something extremely sexy about her vulnerable, cozy attire in a completely different way from when she was wearing a swimsuit.

*I thought people only dressed like this in front of their family or their boyfriend…*

At the same time, his eyes unconsciously lowered a little toward her seemingly too-tight pajama top, when Maria suddenly placed both hands over her chest and twisted her body as if she was uncomfortable.

"D-don't stare. ♪"

"S-sorry!"

Although he didn't consciously do it for the most part, his action was still ill-mannered and disrespectful, so he frantically looked up at the ceiling in absolute embarrassment.

"I—I usually wear a sleep bra! But I forgot to pack one…"

"…"

*I didn't ask. I didn't even care. And I wish she never came out and told me she wasn't wearing a bra because I would have never noticed otherwise! How could she be this different from her sister?! She's a little…off, isn't she?*

He really thought she was, and his eyes shifted even farther up toward the ceiling, only stopping when he could barely see the top of Maria's head.

"So? What did you need me for?"

"So…I was thinking I wanted to give Chisaki and Touya some time alone together, and…"

"…? Ohhh."

That was when it hit him. Chisaki was currently…in the room he and Touya were supposed to be staying in.

"So that's what this is about."

It wasn't often they could come to a beach cottage like this, so it was only natural that two people going out would want some time alone. And if that was the case, then Masachika wasn't going to bother them.

"All right, I think I'll just crash on the sofa downstairs, then…"

He didn't know whether Chisaki was staying in Touya's room or Touya in Chisaki's, and he didn't plan on asking, either. That would be tactless, and that was why he was planning on sleeping on the sofa in the living room. That way, he could be like, "I saw them talking last night, but I have no idea what happened after that." That would be

what a gentleman and a sensible friend would do. At least, that was what Masachika was thinking, when…

"Why? What's wrong with sleeping here?"

"Everything," replied Masachika with a straight face, the complete opposite of her casual suggestion. "Two teenagers of the opposite sex sleeping in the same room? When they aren't even going out? It would hurt your reputation."

"I don't care. ♪"

"I do," he announced in complete seriousness. Maria blinked a few times in wonder, but a warm smile soon curled her lips once more.

"*Giggle.* The fact that you care so much is proof enough that it'll be okay. Don't worry. I wouldn't suggest doing this if I didn't trust you."

The innocent smile and genuine trust rendered Masachika speechless. Maria then raised an index finger and continued:

"Besides, people are going to find out about Chisaki's secret meeting with her boyfriend if they catch you sleeping on the couch in the living room. And I think that would be very embarrassing for her, too. Things would be awkward between her and all the first-year students for the rest of the trip."

"Mmm…"

"Even if nobody found you on the couch, you could catch a cold, or maybe you wouldn't be able to sleep well. You wouldn't be able to enjoy yourself tomorrow if that happened, and they would probably end up blaming themselves for that. So don't worry about me and sleep here. ♪"

"…"

Masachika was having a hard time arguing, because she was being uncharacteristically pushy and eloquent for someone who was usually more of a warm, comforting big-sister type. But even then, his sense of morals was still making him hesitant, so Maria abruptly leaned forward and looked up into his eyes.

"Kuze."

"…? Yes?"

As he raised his eyebrows, she tapped a finger against his chest, lowered her tone as if to say, "Do I have to spell it out for you?" and argued:

"Listen. You are already asleep in this room. Now Chisaki has an excuse to stay in Touya's room. Got it?"

"…!"

His eyes opened wide in surprise. If he really wanted to help them,

then he needed to cut off their path of retreat as well. That was what Maria was saying, and it was something he hadn't even considered. Masachika found himself on the verge of being convinced, when…

"…Wait. No, no, no, no."

…he suddenly remembered an extremely important detail and wildly shook his head, which he'd been about to nod in agreement.

"I get what you're saying, but…! Masha, you have a boyfriend. I don't want anyone to get the wrong idea and think you're cheating on him."

He promptly declined, using Maria's boyfriend as his reasoning.

"Give me a second," Maria said as she slowly stood up and approached the bed to the right of the window. She picked up a smartphone off her pillow, typed and scrolled for a few seconds, then turned it so the screen was facing Masachika.

"There you go."

"…?"

It was a picture of Maria tightly hugging a colossal teddy bear.

"…? That's one big teddy bear, huh?"

As he tilted his head curiously, Maria pointed at the stuffed animal and announced:

"Allow me to introduce you to my boyfriend, Samuel III!"

"……?"

Her totally unexpected confession rendered him speechless, and it took another few seconds for him to finally comprehend what was said as he unconsciously placed a hand on his forehead.

"Uh… Uhhh… Wait. So does that mean you were lying about having a boyfriend?"

"Hmm… I suppose you could say that? At any rate, you don't have to worry about a thing, Kuze."

"…Uh-huh."

His brain couldn't keep up with all the sudden, shocking data, so he remained stock-still in utter confusion. Amused, Maria took a seat by the window and waved him over.

"Uh… May I sit here?"

"Be my guest. ♪"

He sat, hoping to solve the countless mysteries overloading his mind. Then after taking a few moments to sort out his thoughts, he asked frankly:

"So, uh… You have been pretending to have a boyfriend to stop guys from hitting on you? Am I understanding this correctly?"

Maria shifted her gaze to the world outside the window without answering his question.

"The stars are so beautiful tonight."

"Huh? Oh, right. They are, aren't they?"

"Maybe it's because there's less light pollution out here? There are so many."

"Yeah, I guess…"

Masachika looked up at the night sky as well. A brief moment of silence followed until Maria suddenly muttered:

"I believe in destiny and that I have a soulmate."

He turned in her direction, but she was still gazing at the stars, not even glancing at him.

"Someone who I love from the bottom of my heart… Someone I can give all of myself to… Someone I want to spend the rest of my life with… I believe there is someone who can love me just as much as I love them."

"…So you're saying that the guys who hit on you at school aren't that person?"

"Hmm… Yes, that is what I'm saying."

"And why is that?"

"Because you know your soulmate when you see them."

*Whoa, she's talking about some pretty wild stuff*, Masachika thought as Maria closed her eyes and placed a hand on her chest.

"It's destiny…so I just know we will be brought together one day."

It was as if she was praying. *She's quite the optimist… Actually, it sounds more like she's read way too many manga*, Masachika thought with a smirk, but there was no way he would ever make fun of her for it after seeing her pure, devout expression.

"Okay… Well, I really hope you find him."

Although he went with a safe response, he was met with a genuine, mature smile and gentle gaze, and it took his breath away. Maria's smile faded into curiosity.

"What about you, Kuze?"

"Huh?"

"On the train, we talked about how there was a girl you liked in elementary school, but you weren't interested in relationships anymore."

"Oh… Yeah, basically."

"And why is that?"

Masachika's lips twisted bitterly as if she were peering into the

secrets of his heart, so he decided to avoid the question like he usually did…but there was something about Maria's eyes—eyes that forgave all and accepted anyone—that naturally softened his expression.

"…My parents got divorced."

And before he even realized it, he was telling her the truth. He was opening up about his trauma—which he had never told anyone else about.

"They were in love. They shared that love and had children because of it. But it all ended in resentment and disgust… They were truly in love at one point, though."

He recalled his mother blaming his father. He frowned reflexively as the repulsive screaming played back in his mind.

"What was it that bothered my mother so much? I get that my father wasn't home a lot because he was working, but he was always so kind. He gave up his dreams and devoted himself to her. And yet… all she ever did was yell at him."

Perhaps they'd tried their best so that their children wouldn't have to see them act that way, but it was painfully obvious for a smart kid like Masachika that their relationship was crumbling. Why was his mother so harsh toward his father? What did he do? Masachika's mind was plagued with these thoughts, but there was no way he could ever ask his mother, who'd always been so gentle and kind around him. But one day—the day his mother shouted at him as if she was disgusted by him—that day changed everything. He realized that his mother was someone who could be showered with love but give back only hate, no matter how unfair or illogical it may be. He realized she was hopeless, selfish, and cruel.

"It's a waste of time…"

Once he came back to his senses, he realized he was resentfully muttering to himself and hurriedly shut his mouth. Maria, however, showed neither surprise nor concern but instead looked at him with her usual all-encompassing gaze.

"What is?" she curiously asked.

"…Love."

Was he encouraged by those eyes or annoyed? Regardless, he sneered cynically as he spit out the words he had been trying to suppress as if a dam had been broken.

"Continuing to love the same person is impossible. It doesn't matter how hard you try or how much you devote yourself to them. Once the spark is gone, it's over. When you fall out of love with

someone, there's no way to make things the way they were before. And taking something like that seriously is a complete waste of time."

Only after the words came out of his mouth did he realize that what he said went so completely against Maria's beliefs on love, it was as if he was insulting her. His gaze dropped to the floor after he realized how careless he was. Maria then stood from her chair, walked over to his side…and gently wrapped her arms around his shoulders. Her soft hair brushed against his cheek, and she lovingly and tenderly rubbed his head, making Masachika's eyes widen.

"It's okay… It's okay…"

"…"

He froze within her sudden embrace as she softly continued:

"You must have really loved your mother."

"…!"

"And you really love your father, even now."

"…"

Her extremely sweet voice rendered him powerless, leaving him unable to impulsively argue back. All he could do was surrender himself to her hug.

"It's okay… You feel such deep hatred because of the deep love you have, and that's why it's going to be okay."

"…"

"You can love again."

Her boundless loving words surprisingly found their way into Masachika's heart. It felt as if her caring touch were patting the head of a young Masachika Suou whom he had sealed away years ago.

"How…?"

How did she know exactly what to say? How could her touch penetrate the walls around his heart so easily?

Come to think of it, it'd been the same that day as well. As the sun set in the hallway, she'd rubbed his head and praised him, acknowledging the hard work he had been doing. It was all he ever wanted to hear from his mother when he was a child. It was all he ever wanted. He never told anyone that as far as he could remember. In fact, it was something he never even realized himself until now. And yet this woman heard the cries of his heart and consoled him as if it was only natural.

"How…? Why do you understand me so well?"

"Hmm? *Giggle.* I wonder why."

She evaded his straightforward question, then while still holding

him in her arms, she began to pat him on the back like she was comforting a small child.

"H-hey, uh…"

"You can rely on others more, Kuze. You can show weakness."

"…"

"You told me before that you do everything you do for yourself because you're selfish."

"Huh? Oh… Yeah."

"Then be selfish. Be kind to yourself. Spoil yourself. You have my permission."

Tears suddenly began to well in his eyes before he could even emotionally process what was going on.

*Wh-what the…?! No! What's going on?!*

The tears streamed down his cheeks one after another despite his confusion.

*Why…?! This is so pathetic. I can't believe this is happening.*

But ridiculing himself for crying in Maria's arms couldn't stop the tears from overflowing.

*The hell…? I'm such a loser… I feel sick…!*

While he clenched his teeth to hold back the tears, Maria continued to rub his head as she tightly held him in her arms. She gently pressed his face into her shoulder without saying a word and waited for him to calm. The thought of her pajamas getting dirty didn't even cross her mind.

*Ah… What is this feeling…?*

In a slight daze from crying, he found that he was genuinely at ease for the first time in forever. The warmth from her body touched his heart before slowly spreading throughout his entire body, bringing him unbelievable comfort. He closed his eyes and prepared to surrender himself to her…when he suddenly realized that he had already stopped crying, which simultaneously brought him back to his senses, and he leaned away from Maria in a panic.

"Hey, uh… Like… I'm sorry?" he stammered while rubbing his eyes, but Maria warmly smiled back at him as she stood from her chair.

"Don't worry about it. ♪ …I am sure you were just due for a little physical contact. ♪"

"Heh… Physical contact, huh?"

As he awkwardly glanced up, she proudly puffed out her chest and added:

“Physical contact is important. Even if you connect with someone emotionally, you’re still going to feel lonely eventually without the touch of another.”

“Uh-huh…”

“Of course, it’s important to show love through your words and behavior, but that’s not everything. Physical contact is just as important. It’s a reminder that someone is there for you and you for them,” she argued with a hand on her chest, naturally causing Masachika to reflect.

*Now that she mentions it, when was the last time I had physical contact with anyone like this?*

The first person to come to mind was his sister, Yuki. Even now, she would constantly hug him and jump on top of him, but he would usually push her away out of embarrassment, and never had he ever surrendered himself to her embrace like he just had with Maria. Besides Yuki…he couldn’t think of a single other person he’d had physical contact with.

*Wait… Hold on…*

There was that girl from his childhood. Perhaps it was because of the culture she was born into, but he remembered her loving physical contact as well. Even as a child, he could remember her unashamedly hugging him with the purest smile, and he’d let her, although he’d been flustered.

*It’s been that long, huh?*

But he was overcome with absolute embarrassment the moment he realized that he probably was starved for affection, and he began to lower his gaze…when Maria suddenly drew her face close to his.

“That’s why, Kuze…!”

“Huh?! Yes?”

“That’s why I think Alya should let me hug her more!”

“…Uh-huh.”

He smiled and tilted his head. She placed her hands on her hips, huffing with rage, making him wonder if he had dreamed up her boundless compassion from only a few moments ago.

“She doesn’t really like it when I kiss her on the cheek, and she won’t even let me hug her. I have so much love that I need to give her!”

“Yeah… Good luck with that.”

“Hmph! I’ll just have you console me if she’s going to be like that!”

“Why me?!”

His eyes were wide with shock as her arms tightened around him before almost immediately letting him go. She gleefully smiled at him. Although he didn't know why she was grinning, he stopped caring after gazing at her pure smile until he naturally burst into laughter.

"Ha-ha-ha! Masha, I honestly don't get you at all."

"Hmm? What do you mean by that?"

"Sometimes, it's like you can read my mind, but other times, I have no idea what you're even saying."

"Ruuude! You make it sound like I'm an idiot. ♪"

"I didn't mean it like that, but— Ha-ha…!"

As if the pent-up energy had been sapped out of his body, Masachika laughed at his schoolmate, who would occasionally get upset like a child, and Maria broke into a smile as well.

"Are you about ready to go to sleep?"

"Yeah… Thanks, Masha."

"No need to thank me. ♪"

Maria waved her hand as if it was nothing while he bowed, then she pointed slowly toward the bed where her belongings were.

"You can sleep here, Kuze."

"Huh? But I thought that was your bed…?"

"Which is exactly why I want you to use it. Chisaki would probably be uncomfortable if another guy was sleeping in her bed, right?"

"Oh, good point. Well, then…don't mind if I do…"

Convinced by her argument, he slowly crawled into her bed as Maria closed the curtains and climbed into the other bed.

"Good night. ♪"

"Good night, Masha."

The feminine voice in the darkness once again reminded him that he was about to sleep in the same room as a woman, and he started to get restless.

*Am I really going to be able to sleep like this…?*

He worried, pulling the thin blanket over his body. But perhaps due to the long trip here, the swimming in the ocean, or from crying so much, he fell into a deep sleep within minutes of closing his eyes.

◇

…Meanwhile, in the girls' room next door, three first-year students were having a pajama party at Yuki's request.

“So, Alya, why didn’t you want to sleep in the same room as Masha anyway?” Yuki asked suddenly in the middle of their conversation.

“…Because she’d try to use me as a body pillow.” Alisa frowned.

“Huh?”

Both Yuki and Ayano blinked in wonder at the unexpected response.

“…Masha always uses a really big body pillow—well, I guess it’s more like a giant stuffed animal—but anyway, she always hugs it until she falls asleep. But whenever we’re on vacation and she leaves it at home, she sometimes grabs whatever’s nearby when she’s half asleep… Even now, whenever we go on family vacations at a traditional inn, she’ll sometimes slide into my futon and…”

“Oh, wow. She might be using Chisaki as a body pillow as we speak, then.”

Alisa faintly smirked at Yuki’s speculation.

“Most likely. But Chisaki is strong enough to escape if she needs to.”

“*Giggle.* She might even kick her out of the bed.”

“I hope so. Then maybe she’ll finally learn her lesson and stop using people as body pillows.”

The soft laughter of three high school girls filled the room that night. Another hour passed before the pajama party came to an end at last, each one of them sound asleep. Little did they know…that what they were joking about was actually about to happen in the room next door.

◇

*Hmm…?*

Masachika woke up to a strange sensation, as if something was crawling up his body.

*The hell…?*

Keeping his eyes closed, he slowly became conscious of the sensation, much to his frustration. Something long and slender (arms?) slowly wriggled over his chest and around his neck as something (legs?) tangled around his legs. That was when Masachika realized that there was someone to his right who was messing with him, but his half-awake nerd-brain immediately assumed what was going on.

*Oh… It’s Yuki.*

It was a common trope in anime for a girl to sneak into the protagonist's bed while they were on a trip somewhere. If it was a training camp for some kind of school club, then a half-asleep girl would wander into the wrong room. If it was a school trip, then everyone would be gathered in the girls' room, and when a teacher, who was on patrol, came by to check on them, they would panic and hide in the same bed. These were the most common patterns. At any rate, a cultured individual such as his sister would be the only one who would ever try to make something as nerdy as this a reality. If he opened his eyes, she would probably be smiling and be like, "Good evening. ♡"

"Mmm…mn…"

Masachika moved around in an aggravated manner, still keeping his eyes closed. Usually, he wouldn't mind entertaining his adorable sister and playing along with her little games, but he was exhausted due to swimming and the long trip there. He neither had the energy to do this nor was he in the mood to.

"Mmm… Enough…already…," he mumbled, shuffling his right arm, but when he tried to use his elbow to push her away, it was suddenly absorbed into something extremely soft. He tried to push harder, but he couldn't reach his sister's body. It wasn't long before even moving his arm grew tiresome, and he simply gave up. He then went back to sleep, figuring she'd eventually get bored and leave…

◇

Early the next morning, Masachika woke to an unfamiliar heat and weight pressing down on his right side.

"Mmm…"

When he opened his eyes, he saw a ceiling he didn't recognize. However, after a few moments went by, he remembered he was at the beach cottage and started to roll over…but something on top of him was preventing him from doing so, and he started to sweat. The gradually rising temperature in the morning wasn't helping, either.

"Hmm?"

He slowly lifted his head…and froze the moment he saw *what* was on top of him. Soft brown hair lay before his eyes like waves over the cherubic face of a young woman, even cuter than she was beautiful. It was hard to believe that she was older than him. But contrary to her angelic expression were those two sinister mounds.

"Hff…"

And once he saw those, he lay back down on his pillow and exhaled deeply. He had finally processed what was going on. He had no idea how it had come to this, but he completely understood the kind of situation he was in. On his right shoulder was Maria's head, and on his chest was her right hand. Around his right elbow, her plump chest rested, and her legs were intertwined with his. The legs were speculation, however, due to everything below the chest being hidden under the covers. And while this was also nothing but speculation, judging by the position of Maria's legs, it seemed his right hand was being held down by an extremely risqué part of her body around the groin… Was this really what he thought it was? It was difficult to tell, since he hardly had any feeling in his numb right hand; she had been lying on it for a long time already.

"So this is what it feels like to be a winner."

That was the conclusion he came to after calmly analyzing the situation: He'd woken up with an incredibly beautiful woman by his side. He imagined himself as a sexy, muscular man with chest hair popping out and a cigar in his mouth, a nude, beautiful blond woman sleeping by his side. In actuality, however, he had a brunette in pajamas by his side, and they weren't even boyfriend and girlfriend…

*Wait! Then what are we doing sleeping together in the same bed?!*

The delayed reaction dragged him back to reality, but that still didn't help him understand any better how he got into this mess.

*Uh… Maybe it's because I slept in Masha's bed? And she woke up and went to the bathroom in the middle of the night and accidentally got back in her own bed afterward?*

He could speculate all he wanted, but that wasn't going to change anything. Besides, he could just wake Maria if he wanted to know the reason…

"…"

He bent his head to look up out the window and saw faint light peeking from behind the closed curtains, letting him know that the sun had just started to rise. It was early enough that he was hesitant to disturb his comfortably sleeping bedmate, and he worried that it could be embarrassing for her as well.

*Looks like I've got no other choice. Time to do a jailbreak.*

Around ten seconds went by before he came to the conclusion that he needed to sneak out of bed without waking Maria, and he began considering the order. First, he should probably do something about

her head on his shoulder. No matter his method, moving the head would be the most dangerous, so he had to be extremely careful when sliding his shoulder out.

"Sorry," he apologized softly, then raised his left hand and gently slid it under Maria's head. Feeling somewhat guilty as he touched her soft, smooth brown hair with the palm of his hand, he slowly lifted her head, when…

"Mmm…"

"…!!"

…Maria uncomfortably shook her head and escaped his hand. Although it was merely a two-centimeter drop, her body twitched the moment she hit his shoulder. She slowly lifted up her head and stared at Masachika with heavy-lidded eyes.

"G-good morning," he greeted her with a tense smile.

"Ku…e…," Maria mumbled in a daze, slurring her speech in an attempt to say his name. Then she goofily smiled, mouth wide open, for who knows why before dropping her head straight back down onto his shoulder.

"Mmm… What…are…you…doing here…?"

"That's what I want to ask you."

She cheerfully smiled, rubbing her head against him as if she didn't even hear his calm response.

"*Giggle.* Why? ♪ Whyyy? ♪ Why? ♪"

She mumbled it like a song until she slowly ceased moving as if she had found just the right spot…and promptly fell back asleep.

"You're going back to sleep?!" He frantically whispered, but Maria was already dreaming. "…Seriously?"

Masachika's body went limp as he slowly realized his efforts had all been for nothing, because her head was now even more tightly pressed against his body. Maria gracefully went back to sleep two more times after that until she eventually opened her eyes, which finally began to focus.

"…Huh?"

"Good morning."

"…! Wh-what?!"

Her eyes frantically wandered as her bed head bounced up and down. She then sat up, having realized what was going on, and scooted toward the footboard of the bed while pulling the covers back with her.

"…Stop hiding yourself with the covers. You make it look like

you're a boss who got drunk and accidentally slept with their employee."

It was a situation he could easily imagine with his 2D-obsessed brain, but she didn't seem to even be able to hear him as her face burned bright red and her eyes widened.

"G-good morning," she stammered in utter shock.

"Yes, good morning."

He returned her delayed greeting. An uncomfortable smile crossed his lips as his eyes drifted.

"I guess it's my fault for sleeping in your bed, huh? Looks like you accidentally got into the wrong bed sometime last night."

"Oh, y-yes…"

"It's your first time sleeping here, too, so it's no surprise something like this happened."

"Really…?"

She glanced in his direction…and noticed his pajama top was wet around the chest area—she froze.

"O-oh… This is…"

Noticing her gaze, he tried to say something, but after a few seconds of remaining absolutely still, Maria suddenly placed a hand over her mouth. Yes, the wet stain on Masachika was Maria's drool, which had escaped her mouth the third time she fell back asleep. She apparently discovered some on the corner of her mouth as well, making her already red face even redder. She immediately scooted right over to him and covered the stain with both hands, tears in her eyes.

"No! This isn't what you think! This is not something I usually do!"

"Okay."

"I'm serious! I never drool when I sleep! I need you to believe me! Please!"

"I believe you. I believe you, okay? So please keep your voice down…"

It was like she was clinging to him for help as she looked up into his eyes with a pleading gaze. Masachika nodded multiple times, telling her that he believed her so she would lower her voice. After all, it was only the previous day that he learned even the smallest sounds could be heard from the neighboring room, and he did not want anyone finding out he was here. Although they would most likely still be asleep this early in the morning, Maria's voice could wake the first-year students up, and he didn't want to imagine what would happen if

one of them came to check on Maria.

"Mmm… Really?"

"Really. If anything, I consider it a reward, so don't worry about it."

The panic caused the nerd to just slip out of him. After blinking at him for a few moments, she suddenly frowned and briskly scooted away from him.

"…You're such a pervert."

"Oh, uh… Yep. I'm fine with that."

Although he had no idea how she'd reached this conclusion, he was relieved that she had calmed down, and his tense muscles instantly relaxed…just as his greatest fear came to life.

"Masha? Good morning. Is everything okay in there?"

Yuki's voice could be heard coming from the other side of the door, following a knock. Their eyes immediately shot in the direction of the door, and they promptly began to panic.

*I have to hide… The closet!*

After surveying the room, his eyes locked on the closet at the foot of the bed. He swiftly bent his legs to stand, when…

"Hide!" Maria simultaneously whispered, standing up to throw the blanket over his head. Their eyes met on top of the bed as they both leaned forward…and were completely caught off guard by the other's actions. Masachika, being stopped right as he was about to run, lost his balance and fell while Maria tried to lean far back to evade him crashing into her, but…

"Ah?!"

"Eek!"

…his head slammed right into her shoulder as he flew forward. And though he managed to reflexively grab on to the bed and catch himself, he was face-to-face with Maria's shocked and astonished expression…for he was lying right on top of her while she still tightly gripped the blanket.

"Ah! I can feel the rom-com waves!"

Yuki immediately sensed something and threw the door open, where she found the two of them on top of the bed and froze. Her excitement faded. After slowly letting go of the doorknob, she placed a foot by the door to keep it open as she took out her phone and held it in front of her face. *Click.* Once she checked to make sure she'd gotten a good shot, she gave them the thumbs-up with a firm nod…and then left the room.

“““…”””

It seemed so natural that they couldn’t move for a few seconds after that. Masachika stared in mute amazement at the door for another few seconds but eventually got off Maria.

“I’m sorry, Masha. Are you okay?”

“Oh, it’s fine. And I’m okay, too.”

“Thank goodness. Anyway, I think I’ll head downstairs first.”

“R-right.”

After making sure she was all right, he quietly got off the bed, checked that nobody was in the hallway, and left the room. Once downstairs, he saw his sister cheerfully shaking her phone with the biggest grin as she escaped to the living room as if to taunt him.

“Hey, wait!”

And he dashed after her like a wild boar.

CHAPTER 9

# *You're* calling *me* a tyrant?

"Let's play *king's game*."

It was the second day of their vacation. The weather forecast had betrayed them, and it'd started raining while they were having lunch, so they were discussing playing a game in the living room until it stopped. But this single suggestion of Touya's instantly struck fear in Masachika and Yuki.

*G-great… A game for extroverts…*

They thought the exact same thing as a shiver ran down their spines, and they began to tremble…for no specific reason in particular, though. They weren't exactly introverts, after all.

"King's game…?"

Sitting next to the trembling siblings, Alisa curiously tilted her head.

"Whaaat? You don't know? King's game, Alya. King's game," Maria said in surprise.

"Yes, I have ears."

Maria looked triumphant and pointed her index finger at her sister's annoyed glare.

"Heh… Let me tell you about king's game. ♪ First, everyone draws a slip of paper. Each slip of paper has a number on it except for a single piece that has a red mark. Whoever gets the red one gets to be the king, who can order people by their number to do things. ♪ Like 'Number Two has to feed Number Five' or 'Number Four has to kiss

Number One.'"

She then squealed, placing her hands on both blushing cheeks, despite being the person who said it.

"K-kiss?!"

Alisa's eyes widened, contrary to her sister's excitement.

"No. No kissing. Nothing extreme. Let's keep it in the realm of reason, everyone," Touya added with a forced smile. He then began looking around the room and continued:

"But you could say…'Number Two has to tell a funny story' or 'Number Three has to flick Number Five on the forehead.' I think keeping it lighthearted like this would work best."

"Flicking someone on the head… I've never really done that before…"

Chisaki, sitting by his side, stared hard at her right hand while slowly lifting it up, creating an O with her thumb and middle finger. She then started putting some muscle into her middle finger as it trembled against her thumb until…

*Bang!*

"You should probably hold back a little, Chisaki." Touya smiled after witnessing her fire a blank. It sounded like there was an explosion, but surely, it was just the friction between her fingers… There was no way—absolutely no way—that was the sound of something traveling through the air faster than the speed of sound.

"At any rate, this is a game for all of us to learn more about one another and get along, so let's keep that in mind when giving orders."

"Uh-huh…"

As Masachika tilted his head back, wondering why they were even going to play king's game, Chisaki grinned as if she could read his mind and looked at Touya.

"In other words, you wanted to do something only extroverts usually do, right? Got it."

"What…?! N-no… That's not why I…"

His voice tapered off, clearly flustered, and everyone's eyes narrowed. It was only natural for someone who used to be an extreme introvert to yearn for an opportunity like this. As Chisaki looked at him dubiously, he put his hands up and demanded:

"Stop! Don't look at me like that!"

"Yep, I get it. Let's play king's game."

"I agree. I will start preparing the slips of paper, then."

"Stop being considerate…! Oh, I already got everything we need.

We're using chopsticks, by the way."

"You were set on doing this…"

With a smirk, Masachika and the others got off the couch, laid some cushions on the carpet, and sat in a circle. To the right of Masachika was Alisa, followed by Maria. Next to Maria—in other words, across from Masachika—was Yuki, and sitting on his left was Ayano, then Chisaki, and finally, Touya. And in the center of the group were seven disposable chopsticks that were sticking out of an empty minibottle. Incidentally, these weren't the disposable kind with the squared handles that were connected all the way. They were the round kind that only connected at the head, and the chopsticks were placed in the bottle upside down with just the flat ends showing. Therefore, it seemed safe to assume he had written the numbers and the red marking on the flat heads of the chopsticks.

*Meaning…I won't be able to discern which are which based on how they were split.*

Masachika was already thinking of ways to cheat before the game even started, but you wouldn't be able to tell by the innocent look on his face. While some people might think he was childish for doing something like this when it was just a game, he didn't have a choice. Because…if there was anyone who could cheat and get away with it, it was Yuki, and she would take the opportunity if it presented itself. It was a magnificent game where you could give any order you wanted to someone. There was no way that sister of his wasn't going to try to create chaos for her own amusement.

*Even Touya has a history of cheating. He cheated during mah-jongg, so there's a possibility he did something to the chopsticks…maybe? I mean, I'm sure he meant it when he said he wanted to do this to strengthen our relationship, and I doubt he'd try anything funny even if he did do a little cheating, but…*

His mind rapidly searched for possibilities as he drew a chopstick at Touya's request. After making sure everyone had gotten one, Touya took the lead and asked:

"Is everyone ready? Who…is…the king?!"

Everyone thereupon checked their chopstick in unison.

"Oh my. ♪ Is it me?"

Maria blinked in wonder while holding a chopstick with its head painted red. It appeared she was going to be the first king…but there was something else that Masachika was more concerned with.

*Depending on the angle, you can see the number on the chopstick when*

*they draw.*

Of course, his mind was focused on cheating. And this was something that probably—almost definitely—never crossed Touya's mind when he prepared. But for someone with the dynamic vision of Masachika, who treated rock-paper-scissors as nothing more than a visual exercise (he would watch his opponent begin to throw their move and base his move on that), he would easily be able to see the numbers on the drawn chopsticks as long as they were facing his direction. And of course, if he could do it, then that meant Yuki…and possibly Chisaki could do it as well.

*This is bad. There's no way of knowing which way the number is going to be facing since the chopsticks are round, so if I accidentally draw mine facing Yuki's direction, I'm doomed.*

Sensing the danger, he tried to secretly leave a mark with his fingernail on the tip of the chopstick…but he almost immediately gave up. Not only was the chopstick itself pretty hard, but the surface was also so smooth that it would have been obvious if he had left a mark.

*It looks like I'm going to have to leave a good bit of this up to luck. I guess I just have to pray that the number on my chopstick isn't facing her direction and that she doesn't become the king…*

"All right… I want Number Two to…"

Maria's sudden voice interrupted his flow of thoughts. He looked down at his chopstick once more and made sure he was Number Four. He then looked back up while Maria simultaneously placed a finger on her cheek and continued:

"Hmm… To heat up a pot of tea with their belly button! The belly-button tea challenge!"

"That's impossible…," Masachika interjected with a straight face, and it wasn't only him who felt that way. Even Chisaki wryly smirked and asked:

"What kind of order is that? How do you even do that?"

"Hmm? You know, the Japanese proverb. The moment I heard it, I fell in love…and wondered if it really was possible."

"No."

"But what if we all tickled the person until they couldn't stop laughing and—?"

"It's not going to work. You want someone to laugh to death just to see if they can boil some tea? That's absurd."

Masachika nodded in agreement with Chisaki's rational assessment. Maria slightly pouted, then tilted her head in the opposite

direction.

"Then… Oh! I know! How about the bottle-cap challenge?! I want to see someone try it!"

"The what?" Chisaki replied in wonder. *Why are you making us do some kinda challenge?* thought Masachika as he explained:

"It was popular online a while back. It's when you open a plastic bottle without using your hands… Anyway, Chisaki, I'm guessing you're Number Two by the way you're reacting."

"Oh yeah. I am." She nodded, easily admitting her number. Touya then walked over to the refrigerator and pulled out a two-liter bottle of mineral water.

"I didn't really see that many people do it, but I think you're supposed to kick the bottle cap and spin it off?" Touya asked as he placed the bottle on the floor.

"Exactly. ♪ When I saw someone try it…they did some kind of spin kick? And I guess they hit the bottle cap perfectly with their heel and unscrewed it."

"A spin kick, huh?" Chisaki muttered to herself as she got up.

"Hold on. I don't think it's supposed to still have water inside… Plus, I don't think you can do it barefoot. You should probably put your shoes on and—"

Chisaki swiftly turned her back to the water bottle in the middle of Masachika's sentence and…

*Fwp! Bam!*

Only afterimages of the bottled water's tip could be seen, which were almost immediately followed by the soft sound of something rattling around the couch. Everyone, with the exception of Chisaki, simultaneously darted their eyes in the direction of the sound…and witnessed the *cap still attached to the tip of the bottle* bouncing off the couch and landing on the cushions.

"""""……"""""

And when they looked back at the bottle, perhaps to no one's surprise, they saw that the top of the plastic bottle had been perfectly severed as if someone had used a sword, and not a single ripple could be seen in the water, either. As a hush fell over the audience, Chisaki, still standing on one leg, tilted her head and asked:

"…Like this?"

"……Uh-huh." Touya nodded after a ridiculously long pause… That was all he *could* do, after all.

*That was one fast kick… Even I couldn't keep up with it. Heh-heh.* ☆

Masachika joked to himself while trying to calm his trembling hands.

"Wow, Chisaki! That was incredible! You completed the bottle-cap challenge. ♪"

Nobody else was complimenting her but Maria. She had a big heart. What a king.

"…Allow me to clean up."

Ayano swiftly stood, grabbed the bottle, and returned it to the refrigerator as everyone else silently returned their chopsticks, which Touya mixed and shuffled behind his back. Once Ayano returned, everyone drew a chopstick, and Touya ended up becoming the next king.

"Oh! It looks like I'm the king!" He smirked, speaking with a cheerful tone in an attempt to lighten the mood. He then looked around at each and every one of them before giving an order.

"All right… I want Number Five to tell us a funny story."

"That's a pretty nasty order to make for your first command…"

"Oh, Number Five. That's me. ♪"

"How the mighty have fallen…"

Once overthrown, Maria had been made into a peasant or even a jester, perhaps, with no rights and forced to do the unthinkable. After placing a finger on her lips and thinking for a few moments, her face suddenly lit up as if she had recalled something good.

"I was reminded about this story because we're going to a festival later. It happened a long time ago at a festival I was at in Russia. It was extremely crowded, so I guess someone bumped into this man, and his shopping bag ripped wide open. Apples went everywhere. ♪ Plop, plop, plop. One after another."

Maria stopped there. Immediately, Alisa's shoulders started to faintly tremble, before she couldn't contain her laughter anymore. "Pfft!" she burst out. However, the other five had no idea what part of that story was funny. To put it bluntly, it was more like, "Wait. That's it?"

*Wh-what…? Is this some sort of Russian joke I don't get? Ugh! It doesn't make any sense!*

He couldn't understand what was so funny. But what he did understand was that it would be awkward if everyone remained silent, and if his older schoolmates weren't going to say anything, then he was going to have to step up to the plate. He was on a mission. He thought as hard as he could about it and then…

“I’m *apple-d* nobody helped him.”

“H-ha-ha! Good one, Kuze!”

“*Giggle.* I agree.”

“Ha-ha…ha… Kuze, you can’t steal people’s thunder like that.”

“Ha-ha. Sorry.”

The three of them played along, ending Maria’s incomprehensible story on a vague but positive note. Ayano was air, so there was no need to worry about her. Everyone then returned their chopstick and quickly started the next round.

“Huh. Me again…,” Touya muttered with the chopstick marked red in hand.

“You’re quite the lucky guy.”

“I guess? Anyway, let’s go with something harmless… How about we have Number Three make a funny face?”

He gave a very basic order, perhaps having learned his lesson from the previous round, but it was a rather harsh command when you considered the female-to-male ratio. A tense air reigned over the female members as expected until a certain girl slowly raised her chopstick with the number three on it in the air.

“That would be me.”

It had to be Ayano of all people.

*Ayano’s going to make a funny face?!*

Ayano, who usually wore a blank expression and only moved her eyes for the most part, was about to act silly, which immediately got everyone’s attention. As a tense air filled the empty spaces between them, Ayano sat in complete silence until she eventually raised her hands slowly, pinched her cheeks, and pulled them up.

“What are you? Some kind of robot who finally got a heart?”

“IS THIS HAPPINESS? BEEP.”

“Wow, Chisaki. Impressive.”

“Ha-ha-ha. I know, right?”

Chisaki had promptly played along with Masachika’s joke, but Ayano herself blankly looked back at them as if she had no idea what they were talking about, and that, too, was very robot-like.

“Uh… Okay, then. Well, she did follow orders.”

“Ha-ha-ha… Yep…”

After Touya gave the okay, they decided to move on to the next round, where the king ended up being…

“Wait. Me?”

…Alisa. After pondering for a moment, she decided to go with one

of Touya's examples from earlier.

"Okay… I want Number Two and Number Four to flick each other on the forehead."

"Ack!" exclaimed Masachika—who had drawn Number Four—in agony. Why? Because…

*Please don't be Chisaki, please don't be Chisaki, please don't be Chisaki…*

He was still too young to die. He looked over at Chisaki with a sliver of hope in his heart…when someone opposite Chisaki raised her hand.

"Oh, that's me. ♪ Are you Number Four, Kuze?"

"Yep. Thank goodness… After you, Masha."

After instinctively letting out a sigh of relief, he combed back his bangs and leaned toward Maria. She then made her thumb and middle finger into an O in front of his forehead.

"All right, here I go. ♪ Hi-yah!"

Her middle finger flew forward with great power…but it was so close that she only hit his forehead with a bent finger before it could even come into full force. In other words, it didn't hurt at all.

"O-oh? This is a lot harder than I thought it'd be."

"Yeah, it is a little tricky. Ha-ha." Masachika laughed vaguely at her troubled smile as she lowered her hand.

"Then could you show me how it's done?"

"Yeah, sure…"

Maria brushed her bangs back while leaning forward…which kind of reminded him of what happened this morning, making him slightly flustered as he got his right hand into position.

"Uh… Like this?"

"Ouch!"

Since Maria was a woman, he flicked *extremely* softly, but she still gave a small yelp and placed a hand on her forehead, perhaps due to his fingernail smacking her square on the forehead.

"Mmm… That really hurt…"

"Sorry about that. I wasn't expecting such a clean hit…"

He apologized in a fluster as she covered her forehead with both hands and pouted…when he was suddenly overcome with wild embarrassment.

*Gaaaaaah! What is this exchange we're having?! We sound like some stupid young couple, and everyone's glaring at us!*

Alisa, who was sitting in between them, had the coldest gaze of

them all. Masachika didn't even have to look at her to know. The air to his left was room temperature, while the air to his right was ice-cold. Hmm? Was this the entrance to a sauna?

*Don't look at me like that. You're the one who gave the order.*

He faced forward once more, pretending not to notice Alisa's glare as he placed his chopstick back in the bottle with an air of nonchalance.

"""Show yourself, my king!"""

Masachika ended up drawing the chopstick with the red mark on it.

"Oh, looks like I'm the king this time."

"Oh my. I believe we just witnessed the birth of a tyrant. *Giggle.*"

"You better not ask us to do anything weird."

"Ouch. The lack of trust hurts, guys." Masachika smirked at Yuki's teasing and Alisa's reminder. He began to ponder what he could ask them to do.

*Hmm… Oh, I know.*

The sudden idea mischievously curled his lips.

"I want Number Six to do an a cappella version of the Seirei Academy school song."

"What are you trying to do?! Make someone die of embarrassment?!"

Chisaki began to rub her arms as a chill ran down her spine.

"So? Who's Number Six?"

Chisaki's reaction delighted Masachika as he searched for the poor sacrifice.

"…I am," exclaimed a voice in the seat to his right. Alisa, of all people, was Number Six.

"Wow. All right, Alya! Let's hear you sing your heart out! Oh, and make sure to stand while you sing," Masachika suggested, brimming with joy as he tried to antagonize her. After she coldly glared at him, she stood and was met with cheers and applause as she began to sing the school song. Immediately, Touya's and Chisaki's expressions froze midcheer. Even Masachika's smile naturally faded. Put simply, she had an extremely beautiful voice. She ended up having the voice of a professional soprano despite Masachika's attempt to make a fool of her, and instead of laughing, they sat with deep-rooted astonishment as if their minds had just been blown by the unexpected, incredible performance. Nobody had time for cheering or jeering any longer as her voice drew them in, and once Alisa finished singing the minute-

long song, the room erupted with applause.

"I'm honestly impressed. I had no idea you were such a good singer."

"I'm average at best."

"Don't be so modest. I was genuinely blown away."

Alisa sat back down somewhat uncomfortably while Chisaki and Touya showered her with genuine praise.

"I was surprised, too. Wasn't expecting you to have such a beautiful voice."

"Oh," she curtly replied before swiftly turning her head away from him…although with slightly red ears. Both Masachika and Maria smiled as if her easy-to-read reaction warmed their hearts, but Alisa brushed away their gazes as if she couldn't take the embarrassment any longer, and she placed her chopstick back in the bottle. The game gradually began to liven up after a few more rounds…until Chisaki became the most aggressive king so far.

"I want Number Two to kiss Number One!!"

The living room froze over at the order—an order that only popular kids would give at parties. Tension. Shock. Not a single person could remain calm, and that included Masachika as he came to a certain realization.

*Chisaki must have seen Touya's chopstick!*

It was what he had feared when they first started playing. He'd been having so much fun that he completely forgot about it, but Chisaki had a good eye just like Yuki and Masachika, which meant she only needed a split second to see someone's number. She would have never given an order like this and risked her boyfriend kissing someone else, otherwise.

"Chisaki, that's…"

"I never said it had to be on the lips. Even a peck on the cheek is okay."

"Hmm… I guess that's okay, then? Who are Number One and Two anyway?"

Touya probably figured a kiss on the cheek wouldn't be a big deal between two female members, but…

"Uh… I'm Number One…"

…his speculation was off the mark, unfortunately. Perhaps the silver lining was the fact that Masachika would be on the receiving end instead of the giving end.

"I am Number Two."

It was Yuki, sitting almost across from him to the side, who raised her hand.

“Kuze and Suou? Uh… Chisaki, I think you should probably pick a better—”

Touya frowned at the unexpected pair and began to ask Chisaki to revoke the order…but before he could even finish his sentence, Yuki was already on all fours as she leaned toward Masachika. She then grabbed his chin, drawing his gaze toward hers…

“Open wide, Masachika.”

“Put that tongue away.”

Without a second of hesitation, she slowly brought her mouth toward his with her tongue sticking straight out…but Masachika immediately placed a hand on her forehead and pushed her away.

“*Giggle.* I was getting worried you might not try to stop me.”

“Then you shouldn’t have done that to begin with.”

They exchanged a grin and a tense smile, still with a hand on his chin and one on her forehead, but it was King Chisaki who was the most surprised.

“W-wait… Huh? W-were they about to F-French-kiss…? Seriously? Seriously?!”

“Huh…”

Chisaki’s and Touya’s eyes widened as they fell silent once more.

“Hey, you put that camera down!”

“…!”

Ayano was silently holding her smartphone in position to take a picture. Maria had a hand over her mouth with her eyes opened wide. And…

“S-stop that this instant! This is wildly inappropriate!”

…Alisa, with daggers for eyes, was trying to pull them apart. Yuki slyly smiled at Alisa, then swiftly grabbed Masachika’s hand that was pushing her forehead back and…

*Mwah!*

…she kissed his palm, mirthfully grinned, and looked back in Chisaki’s direction.

“Anything else, Your Majesty?” asked Yuki as if it was no big deal.

“Th-that is all…” Chisaki nodded absentmindedly with both hands on her cheeks. What an innocent reaction for someone who was in a relationship…

“Ahem… Uh… So…everyone ready to play another round?” Touya urged after theatrically clearing his throat, obviously still a little

flustered. As a slightly awkward silence filled the gaps between their exchanges, Masachika wiped his right hand, where Yuki had kissed him, on his pants and sensed a piercing gaze coming from his right.

*Don't glare at me like that… It's not my fault.*

He made somewhat unmanly excuses for himself in his head as he grabbed a chopstick, but another second went by before he realized his mistake.

*Ack! I was so concerned about Alisa that I let my guard completely down!*

Perhaps having his guard up and being on the watch wouldn't have helped, but if he had only been more careful drawing his chopstick… He immediately noticed a devilish smirk hidden behind Yuki's eyes and was kicking himself because of it.

*Dammit! She saw my number. But as long as she isn't the king…*

But the sliver of hope he once had was brutally squashed not even a second later.

"Oh my. It looks like I am the king."

Her eyes narrowed as she raised the red-marked chopstick into the air. She covered her mouth with the hand holding the chopstick while clearly looking at Masachika and Alisa.

"I think I will take Chisaki's idea and have Number Three and Number Five kiss."

Right as Alisa jumped, Masachika knew for sure that they had been targeted.

*Dammit! She has the devil's luck and a diabolical personality to go with it!*

The game master, Touya, did not stop her, either. Of course he didn't, because Chisaki just gave the same order a few moments ago, and Yuki was the one who followed through with it. It wouldn't be fair to stop her. But…

*But this should definitely be stopped!!*

Kissing Alisa would have long-term consequences, regardless of where he kissed her. It would make their relationship awkward, for starters… Did Yuki realize that and decide to do this to damage her opponents' relationship?

*Whatever the case, I can't let this happen! No matter what!*

Alisa, who was very competitive, was clearly too stubborn to not do it, especially after being provoked by Yuki. That was why Masachika had to kick his brain into overdrive to find a way to avoid this catastrophe.

“So who are Number Three and Number Five?”

But once Yuki determined that Touya wasn’t going to stop her, she promptly began to advance the conversation to make sure Masachika didn’t even get a moment to think.

“I’m Number Five,” Alisa honestly (and foolishly) replied while raising her chopstick.

“Oh my. Alisa is Number Five. And who might Number Three be?”

Yuki pretended to be surprised as she surveyed the other members.

*Argh! I’m out of time… Is there really nothing I can do? Nothing at all?*

Masachika looked around, inwardly clenching his teeth…and he noticed something.

“It’s me. I’m Number Three.”

“Oh, you are? What a surprise. What luck. Wouldn’t you agree?”

A lewd smirk hid behind her innocent gaze. Masachika defiantly gave a smug grin back.

“I don’t know about that, but it really is too bad, Yuki.”

“What ever could you mean?”

But right as her expression became suspicious, he pointed out the front window, still wearing that bold smirk, and announced:

“It has stopped raining.”

Yuki…and everyone else simultaneously faced the window and realized that it had, in fact, stopped raining. Masachika then turned straight to the supreme authority at the cottage.

“The plan was to play games until it *stopped raining*, correct?”

“O-oh, yeah! That was the plan!”

“Which means we’re out of time. Game over.”

“Y-yeah, he’s right! Anyway, it’s about time for a snack, so who’s up for some watermelon splitting?”

Both Touya and Chisaki immediately played along to get the situation under control, since they were partially at fault here. Now nobody could even object, since the president and vice president had made up their minds. As Chisaki, somewhat flustered, began to clean up, Maria faintly smirked, got up, and placed her chopstick back into the minibottle. Noticing everyone was cleaning up, Ayano looked over at Yuki to see how she was reacting, and Yuki gave a small shrug back at her.

“Come on, the game’s over.”

Once Masachika could see that Yuki had given up, he pulled the chopstick out of Alisa’s frozen hand and returned it to the minibottle along with his.

“I’ll go get the watermelon, President.”

“O-oh, great. Thanks.”

“What about the stick? Was there a rolling pin in the kitchen, or did I just dream that?”

“I’m pretty sure it’s somewhere, since someone was using it yesterday.”

“All right.”

“Hey, uh… Let me help.”

Masachika promptly stood up and began heading toward the kitchen, when Alisa, apparently not knowing what to do with herself, awkwardly followed after him.

“Now where’s that watermelon…?”

“I’m pretty sure it’s in the very back…”

Unable to even make eye contact, they searched for the watermelon in the refrigerator while pretending like nothing had happened.

“Oh, there it is—”

He reached out to grab the watermelon, but Alisa was reaching for it as well, and their hands touched. Immediately, Alisa jumped and pulled her hand back.

*Y-yeah, yeah. I’ve seen this scene a thousand times before*, he thought, acting like he didn’t notice as he grabbed the plastic bag with the watermelon in it.

“By the way, what was that joke Masha told about the apples? I honestly didn’t really get the punch line. On second thought, I didn’t even know which part was the punch line.”

Masachika casually changed the subject.

“Huh? O-oh, right. There’s a popular idiom in Russia we sometimes use to describe really crowded places: *There’s no room for an apple to fall*.”

“Ohhh. Now I get it. It was so crowded that there was supposed to be no room for an apple to fall, but several ended up falling, huh? …Is that seriously the whole joke?!”

After Alisa chuckled a little at his reaction, Yuki suddenly poked her head into the kitchen. But when they turned around to see what she wanted, her ladylike mask was off, and her grin was sinister.

“You ran away,” Yuki scoffed with a nasally laugh before disappearing back into the living room.

*Hey?! What happened to our truce?!*

Immediately, he could see Alisa’s fighting spirit swell from behind,

so in a fluster, he set about attempting to calm her down.

"Relax, relax. Don't let her taunts bother you. All she's trying to do is make things awkward between us."

"…"

He held his hands out, like he was trying to calm a wild animal, as she furiously frowned and glared up at him.

"Come on, don't let her get to you. If you take the bait and let your emotions take over…then you might kiss me and regret it later."

"…"

Again, she furiously glared at the door that Yuki had just left through, then briefly grunted while shifting her gaze toward the kitchen table.

"…We need to get the rolling pin, too, right?"

"Y-yeah."

Masachika was relieved to see that she had come to her senses, and he faced the refrigerator once more. Clutching the watermelon to his chest, he closed the refrigerator with his elbow and—

"**<**I wouldn't regret it.**>**"

*Blaaarg…*

The watermelon almost slipped out of his hands and split itself (into countless heartbreaking pieces) the moment he heard her Russian whisper, and he immediately tightened his grip on it in a panic.

*You've got to be kidding me!!*

Masachika was confident he could deal with any one of Yuki's schemes, even if she caught him off guard. But his partner's sweet Russian whispers…were something he still didn't know how to handle, and he sighed to himself in secret.

CHAPTER 10

# Feelings of Love

It was a little past seven that night, and the seven members of the student council had just walked twenty minutes from the cottage to a nearby shrine. After climbing the long stone staircase and passing under the gate, they found themselves in front of the main shrine at the end of the winding stone pathway. Countless stalls lined the pavement, and the area was bustling and lively.

"Whoa… This is the real deal!"

Masachika was expecting this to be more of a small, local festival kind of thing, but there were far more stalls and people here than he could have ever imagined. Touya, wearing a *yukata*, proudly smirked and boasted:

"Surprised you, huh? The firework show is pretty spectacular as well, if I do say so myself. They even bring the portable shrine out the front door and do a lap around the building during the show."

"Wow, seriously?"

Even the girls in the group seemed to be both impressed and taken aback. Incidentally, every one of them was robed in a gorgeous *yukata*. *I am so happy I brought a* yukata *with me*, thought Masachika as he looked at them.

*I'm glad I got Grandpa to send this to me. If I hadn't, I'd have been the only one here in normal clothes at this massive festival. It would have felt so awkward.*

He let out a sigh of relief that he'd managed to not stick out like a

sore thumb, although barely. But the girls looked stunning. Chisaki, Yuki, and Ayano were gorgeous with their traditional black hair and features, but that probably went without saying. Alisa and Maria, however, were extremely beautiful as well, even though they did seem somewhat like foreign tourists renting and experiencing kimonos for the very first time. The only drawback was that the large belts would usually make women like them with huge busts look fat…but that seemed to have been taken care of when a certain someone helped them get dressed—that certain someone being Ayano, and her incredible skills as a maid were really showing. But, well…there was only so much technique could do to help someone who was as blessed as Maria…

"Anyway, how about we walk around and check out the stalls in the meantime?"

"Good idea."

They decided to check out each stall in order…but after just a few minutes went by, a group of random guys came over and started talking to them. Perhaps this was an adverse effect of being surrounded by beautiful young women.

"Hey, ladies. You here on vacation?"

"Whoa! Check out the cuties!"

They appeared to be a group of six university students at first glance. Each one of them was dressed casually and carrying nothing with them, which made it obvious that they'd come here for reasons other than the festival. Both Masachika and Touya stepped forward the moment the guys started talking to them, but there was no way two guys could fully block off five girls from six aggressive university students. The interlopers immediately split in the middle and approached the girls from all sides, creating a half circle to block them from leaving—as if they were used to doing this. They then checked the girls out like they were evaluating their worth.

"What do you guys want? They're not interested in whatever you want to do," Masachika clearly stated.

"Exactly. We came here to enjoy the festival, so you guys need to get out of our way," Touya added with his arms crossed in front of his massive, imposing body. However, they didn't budge and instead laughed foolishly.

"Come on, don't be like that. We're locals. We can show you guys around."

"You're freakin' adorable. What's your name?"

“Yo, is that your real hair color? Oh, wait. Can you even speak Japanese?”

While two of them dealt with Masachika and Touya, the others tried striking up conversation with the girls in an overfamiliar manner. Masachika was overcome with disgust that no words could describe. He and Touya communicated using only their eyes, and they swiftly slid to each side, boxing out the guys while glaring at them.

“Seriously, do you think you could stop? You are scaring them, so you need to back off. We’ll call the police if we need to.”

“Duuude, you’re being way too dramatic.”

“We aren’t trying to make anyone feel scared. Hey, tell me your name. Bonjour? Hola? Guten Tag?”

One of the university students joked around, trying to get Alisa’s and Maria’s attention from where they stood behind Masachika. But right as Masachika began to clench his teeth in frustration, Alisa and Maria started shouting in Russian.

Go back to the forest, Monkey!

“Обезьяна, возвращайся назад в лес!”

Ew! Gross!

“Фуу, противно!”

“…?!”

The scathing Russian almost made Masachika burst into laughter, despite knowing this was not the time for that.

“Whoa. What language is that? Hilarious.”

But one of the guys just laughed it off as he reached out to touch Alisa. Masachika instantly felt something snap inside him. His desire for wanting to end this peacefully had immediately disappeared as he grabbed the guy’s wrist and squeezed it as hard as he could while scowling.

“Don’t touch her.”

There was no warmth in his chilling voice, making his ill intentions more than clear. The student council members who weren’t familiar with this side of him were left speechless. Even the foolishly laughing university student stopped smiling and took a step back, but the guy almost immediately narrowed his eyes and lowered his voice to overcompensate for his embarrassing reaction and threatened:

“The hell’s your problem, man? You better let me go if ya know what’s good for ya.”

The air between them grew tense, the volatile emotions spreading among the other university students until all six of their silly expressions twisted with malice. Touya quietly prepared himself, Yuki

secretly clenched her fists, and Ayano shot three mechanical pencils out of her sleeves before catching them in between her fingers. Tensions were high, and the situation was only getting worse…when all of a sudden, two of the university students on the left suddenly collapsed without making a sound. The instant everyone simultaneously looked over to see what happened, the two guys next to Masachika both took a swift strike to the neck and collapsed as well. The one who'd knocked out four guys in mere seconds was none other than the vice president of the student council, who had remained silent until now.

"Huh…?"

"What the…?"

The remaining two guys were dumbstruck as they backpedaled, still unsure what was going on, but Chisaki simply walked right up to them and swung two hooks at lightning speed, hitting their jaws and knocking them unconscious just like the rest. Within seconds, six men were lying on the ground, causing a stir among the crowd that had started to gather around. Nevertheless, Chisaki paid no attention to the spectators as she grabbed two guys per hand by the collar and looked over at Touya.

"Sorry, Touya. But do you think you could grab those two for me?"

"…Sure," Touya agreed with a somewhat complicated expression, unable to decline his girlfriend's request. After making sure he picked up the other two by the collar, Chisaki casually suggested:

"Sorry, but you guys go on ahead. I'm gonna break, fold, and stack these somewhere so they won't get in anybody's way."

"Those don't really sound like verbs you use with humans… 'Break'? 'Fold'…?"

"What? You wanna watch?"

"I'll pass," Masachika replied instantly with a straight face.

"If you say so," she said, raising an eyebrow before disappearing into the thickets behind the stalls along with six unconscious university students. Masachika slowly looked away as the darkness of the woods started to look like the entrance to hell.

"Phew…"

After exhaling and cooling his head, he faced the remaining four and deeply bowed.

"I'm sorry. I ended up putting everyone in danger instead of actually diffusing the situation."

There wasn't even a hint of rage left as he apologized for letting

his emotions get the best of him. Alisa blinked at him as if she was taken aback for a moment, but she almost immediately placed a hand on his shoulder in a fluster and stammered:

"Y-you're fine. You tried to protect us, and that made me really happy. So lift your head back up, okay?"

The other three began to join in as well.

"Nobody was bothered by what you did. Something tells me that they were not going to listen to reason."

"You were very brave. I quivered."

"You don't need to apologize for a thing. ♪ You were so cool! Now, come on. Let's enjoy the festival."

Just like her little sister, Maria patted Masachika on the shoulder as well. But when he lifted his head back up, he was met with Alisa's worried gaze and Maria's comforting smile. Maria then took his hand along with Alisa's and added:

"Come on, they have cotton candy over there. ♪"

"Y-yes…?"

"Huh? No, uh… I'm not really a big fan of cotton candy."

"Really? Then it looks like it's just you and me, Alya. Come on."

He'd immediately refused without thinking, so Masachika watched Maria and Alisa head over to the cotton-candy stall and started to regret how he had accidentally blown off Maria, who was being extremely thoughtful. But he wasn't yet ready to enjoy the festival. He couldn't switch emotions that quickly. Even though the four of them may have forgiven him, he had let his emotions get the best of him nevertheless and made the situation worse, only to have someone else save his ass. So he was still reflecting on his rashness and beating himself up over it.

"Don't let it bother you so much. You were so badass," Yuki whispered after swiftly slipping by his side as if she could tell he was down.

"Thanks…"

"Seriously, don't worry about it. You got mad for all the right reasons. I bet Alya's heart was racing when she saw you like that."

"What are you even talking about?"

Masachika may have sighed in a fed-up manner, but having a nerdy exchange with his sister like this actually made him feel a little better. Unfortunately, that reminded him of exactly what he wanted to say to her as well, and he swiftly shot her a sharp glare.

"Wait a second. What happened to our truce *you* proposed?"

It was as if his eyes were saying, “What were you doing, provoking Alya in the kitchen after king’s game?” But Yuki looked back at him like he was an idiot.

“What? The only reason you make truces is to get your opponent to lower their guard so you can strike when they least expect it.”

“Damn… She’s right…”

“Besides, you should be thanking me for giving you two a chance to get closer. That’s some 4D chess right there.”

“What makes you think I even want that?”

“Listen to yourself. You two have been getting really close this entire summer break. Am I wrong?”

“Er… That’s… No…”

Curiosity sparkling in her eyes, she poked him in the side with her elbow as Masachika recalled the time he had spent with Alisa during this summer break…but all he could remember was her angry face, and he froze with a question mark over his head.

*I remember being sent straight to heaven, being kicked and punched, and…uh…? We haven’t been getting along at all. If anything, our relationship has gotten worse…*

No matter how long he racked his brain, he could only remember the mistakes he had made—to the point that he was about to start worrying that she was sick of him, instead of them getting closer.

*Wait… No way… Have I been a real piece of crap this entire summer break?*

A sense of gloom hung over his head as he watched the Kujou sisters slowly returning with cotton candy in hand.

“Hey, uh… I’m going to go make sure things are good between Alya and me,” he whispered.

Yuki rolled her eyes at him as if she could see the panic on his face and replied:

“All right, enjoy. I guess I’ll take Ayano over to the chocolate covered–banana stall and teach her how to really please a master.”

“What? No.”

“…I’m kidding. Hmm… I think I’m going to go over to the *katanuki* stall and make the owner cry.”

“Don’t be too mean.”

“Oh, right. Here, I’ll lend you my camera. Come on, Ayano. Let’s go.”

“As you wish.”

While he was watching them mirthfully make their way over to

the die-cut candy street stall, Alisa and Maria returned, but when he looked in their direction, his jaw almost dropped.

"Whoa…"

"…? What?"

"You two look very picturesque even though all you're doing is holding cotton candy."

"Oh my. ♪ Really?"

"…Hmph."

Maria placed a hand on her cheek and smiled while Alisa frowned as if she didn't know how to respond, but Masachika was being genuine. He wasn't merely saying this to get on Alisa's good side. *Yukata* and cotton candy. This simple combination was extremely charming, slowly guiding Masachika's finger to the camera's shutter button.

"Hey, come on… If you're going to take a picture, at least tell us first."

"Sorry. I didn't want to ruin the moment. I can delete it if you want me to, though."

"No… It's fine…but my mouth might have been wide open and…"

"Don't worry. You could make any expression you want and still look good."

"O-oh…"

Alisa swiftly looked away as if she didn't know how to react and began munching on her cotton candy. Maria grinned as she watched her sister's reaction, but Alisa immediately shot her a piercing stare, so she spoke up, changing the subject.

"By the way, where did Yuki and Ayano go?"

"The katanuki stall."

"'Katanuki'?"

"Oh, uh… How should I explain? You get this rectangular candy mold with the shape of something like an animal outlined in the middle, and you have to use a toothpick or a needle to carve it out. If you manage to do that without damaging the rectangular mold, you get a prize."

"Wow. ♪ That sounds like a lot of fun."

"I wouldn't really recommend it to beginners. You could spend hours on it without even realizing it."

"Really? Then I suppose we should save it for last."

"Yeah, definitely. First, let's check out everything we want to see, then if we have time, we can try it out," he suggested to Maria, when

he suddenly noticed Alisa staring at the goldfish-scooping game at a nearby stall. Incidentally, the cotton candy she had bought only a few minutes ago had magically turned into a stick void of any sweet cotton. *Oooh, mysterious.*

"Alya, do you want to try to catch some goldfish?"

"It does look like fun."

"Then come on. What about you, Masha?"

*This is my chance to show I'm not a total scumbag*, he thought while shifting his gaze to Maria.

"I still have a lot left to eat, so I think I'll just watch," she replied, holding up her cotton candy.

"Can you hang on to this for me, then?"

"Sure. ♪ Right, let me take your camera, too."

"Oh, great. Thanks a lot."

After Alisa handed over her cotton-candy stick and Masachika entrusted her with Yuki's camera, they headed straight over to the goldfish-scooping game, paid the middle-aged shopkeeper two hundred yen, and received three scoopers and a small bowl before squatting in front of the inflatable pool. That was when Masachika immediately realized that Alisa was an amateur. Seeing her hold the water-filled bowl in her hand was already a dead giveaway. That was going to increase the distance she had to scoop and increase the amount of damage the scoop was going to take. Plus, sticking your head over the water was a bad idea as well, since the shadow would scare the fish away. Furthermore, trying to catch fish that were running away would —

"Ah…," Alisa softly muttered after almost immediately destroying her first scoop. Out of the corner of his eye, Masachika watched her eyes narrow as she grabbed her second scoop. Meanwhile, he filled his bowl to the brim with water before placing it in the inflatable pool to float. After using the bowl's shadow to guide the fish just where he wanted them, he swiftly pierced the water at an angle with his scoop, and without slowing down, he circled it under water before scooping a fish into his bowl.

"Gotcha."

He did the same thing for the next goldfish and the next one after that.

"Wow, Kuze. You're amazing ♪," Maria cheered in delight. It was that genuine praise that fueled his drive and made his skills shine even more brilliantly than before. All he'd been trying to do at first was

show off a little so he could give Alisa some advice, but Maria's unexpected praise ended up making him feel so good that he started scooping up three to four goldfish at a time. By the time he ran out of all three paper scoops, his bowl was almost overflowing with goldfish. There were at least thirty.

"Wow. ♪ What a performance. ♪"

"Heh…"

He smirked and glanced at Alisa…only to find her clearly irritated and staring at her empty bowl. His face instantly froze.

*What was I thinking?! I completely dominated her! …I mean, it wasn't a competition, but still…!*

That was when he finally realized that he'd gotten so into the game that he had genuinely forgotten the original goal: make Alisa happy. What ever happened to giving her a few pointers so that she'd like him more?

"Uh… Alya, do you want me to teach you how I did it?"

"…No, I'm fine. Thank you very much."

Although late, he still offered to give her some advice, but Alisa succinctly refused, handed the ripped paper scoops back to the shopkeeper, and stood back up. Masachika immediately declined to keep the fish and followed her as regret slowly swallowed his heart.

"H-hey, they're doing water-balloon fishing over there if you want to try it out?"

He promptly invited her to play another game at a nearby stall to redeem himself. It seemed to have a thirty-second time limit per one hundred yen. The water tank was oval-shaped with a hollow center, like a stadium's tracks, and balloons of all different colors gently floated in the water. Maria instantly raised her hand when she saw it.

"Oh, me! I want to try. ♪"

"…I guess I'll try, too."

"Then let's all do it together."

They squatted side by side in front of the tank, each with a string in hand. Attached to the end of each string was a four-prong hook. After the shopkeeper gave them a countdown, they used that tool to try and hook the rubber bands attached to the water balloons. However…

"Ah…!"

"Ah! Mmm…!"

Alisa and Maria were having an extremely hard time with the lightweight, unreliable hooks. For the most part, the hooks wouldn't

face the right direction, and if they did get it around the rubber band, the hook would almost immediately come undone. Twenty seconds had gone by, and neither of them had gotten even one water balloon. Masachika began to focus on the girls to his sides and wait for his chance.

*They're having a rough time… Perfect. Now it's my time to shine. I'll catch one balloon for each of us to make up for the goldfish-scooping game!*

Burning with motivation, he locked his eyes on the surface of the water. He bided his time until there were only four seconds left, when…

*Now's my chance!*

…he swiftly hooked onto a rubber band facing the opposite direction of the flow and pulled up at an angle. He then waited for the exact moment that the string tightened and the hook was locked in to snag two more rubber bands nearby.

"Gotcha!"

"Huh?! Three?!"

"Wow! That was amazing!"

He caught three water balloons simultaneously just like he planned and grinned from ear to ear with evident satisfaction as the stopwatch began to beep at the thirty-second mark… Right at that moment, the hook also snapped off the rope, unable to hold the weight, and all three water balloons thereupon fell back into the water.

"Huh?!"

There was a loud splash as water flew into the air, landing onto both Masachika's legs and the girls'.

"O-oh gosh! I'm so sorry!"

The guilt from getting their beautiful *yukata* wet was too much. He promptly pulled out a handkerchief, but he hesitated to hand it to them when he had been using it to wipe his hands off earlier. He didn't have to make the choice himself, though, because Alisa and Maria each took out their own handkerchiefs and began wiping themselves dry.

"Sorry…"

"It's fine. Not like you did it on purpose."

"We hardly even got wet, so please don't worry about it. ♪ You should worry more about yourself."

"O-oh, uh… Thanks."

Maria began to wipe Masachika's *yukata* with her handkerchief, which made him feel a little bad in a way but also grateful. The shopkeeper ended up giving him all three water-balloon yo-yos that

he'd caught, so they each got one as planned, but…he felt more guilty about getting their *yukata* soaked than happy.

*I-it's not over yet! I can still redeem myself!*

After changing his mindset, he fired himself up once more to show off…but all his effort ended in vain. At the shooting gallery, he managed to shoot down the doll that Maria wanted, but its face got damaged when it hit the ground, making things awkward. When he tried to treat them to stir-fried noodles to make up for getting their *yukata* wet, the cook decided everyone needed to hear his wild speculation on what kind of relationship the three of them were in while unloading every vulgar word you could think of and then some. Masachika splendidly got first prize, a video game, at the ring toss, but the kid behind him immediately burst into tears because there was apparently nothing left that the kid wanted anymore; thus, he gave the boy the video game, which at least got him to stop crying. Nevertheless…there was no way to fix what was broken: the mood. There was no way Masachika could make the festival fun again.

"…I'm really sorry," he apologized to Maria and Alisa after seeing the kid's parents off. The couple held their child's hand, bowing and thanking Masachika as they left.

"…? What are you apologizing for? You did a good thing. ♪"

"No, it's just…something keeps happening, or I end up messing things up. I'm ruining the festival for you guys," said Masachika in a self-deprecating manner.

"Nothing that's happening is your fault, Masachika. Come on. Eat something sweet, and cheer up." Alisa smiled in a slightly troubled manner. Her eyes then wandered for a few moments before she took the chocolate banana in her hands and thrust it at him.

"O-oh, wow. Thanks…?"

A few thoughts flashed through his mind. *Ah, an indirect kiss. But the Madonna is watching.* But even then, he almost reflexively chomped down on the chocolate banana hovering before his eyes. Unfortunately, however, he took a bite right out of the middle to avoid an indirect kiss and…

"Ah…!"

…the fruit snapped in two where he bit, and the top half ended up falling. Alisa promptly reached out to catch it, but it bounced off the top of her hand and landed on the ground.

"Ah…"

"Ack! Sorry!"

“Oh my. So close.”

Maria quickly crouched and picked up the banana as Masachika froze; he’d messed up, and there was no one to blame but himself.

“How about we go wash our hands while we throw this away?”

“…Good idea. We’ll be right back, Masachika.”

“Huh? Hold on. Let me come with—”

“Wait here.”

He offered to go with them, since he wasn’t comfortable letting two young ladies go off on their own, but Alisa was stern and her message clear. That was when he realized that there was probably another reason why they were going to wash their hands together.

“All right… Take your time.”

He also realized how insensitive his comment had been and began to feel guilty yet again. Once he saw them off with an indescribable emotion swelling in his heart, Yuki and Ayano suddenly approached him from the opposite direction.

“My apologies for keeping you waiting, Sir Masachika.”

“Oh, did you two enjoy the katanuki?”

“Yep. The shopkeeper almost started crying after I perfectly carved Nyarlathotep and Shub-Niggurath out of the mold, so I decided to show him some mercy and call it a day.”

“I can’t even imagine what those molds looked like, but I’m sure they were disgustingly difficult.” He sighed apathetically.

“What’s wrong, my dear brother? Did something happen?”

Yuki raised an eyebrow, noticing that Masachika seemed down.

“Yuki… I’m done… I just can’t anymore…”

“O-oh, what exactly happened? You look like you’re about to cry.”

Yuki’s lips pulled back while Ayano rapidly blinked, because it wasn’t common for Masachika to expose vulnerability like this. Before he could explain, though, Touya and Chisaki suddenly showed up. Masachika sighed once more, then got it together.

“Sorry to keep you guys waiting,” Chisaki said as the pair approached.

“Hey. Sorry about all that. Because of me, you had to…”

“Huh? Oh, don’t worry about it. If anything, it gave me an excuse to spend time alone with Touya and check out the festival, so I’m happy.”

“Awww.You two are so close.”

“Ahem… We are a couple, after all.”

“That you are. *Giggle.*”

The couple bashfully smiled with sparkles in their eyes. They looked so happy that it was hard to believe any acts of violence had occurred that day. Masachika snorted at the sight and shrugged. After that, the five of them stood around and chatted for a while until Alisa and Maria finally returned. They spent the next few minutes talking about walking around together when all of a sudden, a thunderous drumming could be heard from within the main shrine.

"Oh, sounds like the portable shrine's here…which also means the fireworks show is about to start."

And just like Touya announced, three portable shrines of all different sizes were exiting the main shrine and traveling down the middle of the stone pathway while spectators moved to the side to get out of their way. As they stepped to the side as well, Masachika inwardly sighed.

*Fireworks, huh? Guess that means the festival's almost over as well… I made a real ass of myself today.*

He wanted to make up for all the things he'd done to Alisa, but he only ended up adding to the list of things he needed to apologize for, making him unbelievably depressed. Then he suddenly felt a tug on the elbow of his *yukata*'s sleeve, and when he turned to his side, Alisa was frowning and looking up at him.

"Stop beating yourself up. I told you before, right? You know…"

"…?"

Alisa fell silent as if she was somewhat worried that the other five on Masachika's opposite side would hear them. Just saying "you know" was far too abstract for Masachika, though, and he had absolutely no idea what she was talking about.

"You know…when we went out together the other day…and were in front of your place…"

"In front of my place…?"

Even after getting another hint from his fidgeting partner, he still couldn't figure out what she was talking about.

*When we went out together? In front of my place? In the apartment's hallway? Did something happen then?*

Masachika tried to trace his memories, his eyes searching the sky for clues, until Alisa suddenly shouted, "Ugh!" and poked his cheek with her index finger. "You really don't understand women at all."

"Huh. Oh? Sorry?"

He still blinked in confusion while his cheek was poked by an angry woman with scornful eyes…when she suddenly cracked

something of a smile and began to scrutinize his face in an amused manner.

"So even *you* sometimes get depressed over a few little mistakes, huh?"

"What? Of course I do."

He arched a brow as if to say, "Who doesn't?" but Alisa pouted back at him in frustration.

"Oh, 'of course,' huh? Everything always goes well for you, despite being so laid-back about it all, so I thought that maybe you didn't care if things didn't go your way."

"If that's how I appear, that's because that's how I present myself, but I actually get depressed just like everyone else does."

However, he almost immediately regretted what he just said right after the words came out of his mouth.

*How stupid am I? How is showing her how pathetic I can be going to help me in any way?*

"Oh?" Alisa muttered as she took a half-step closer to him, slightly nestling up to him and brushing against his arm. She then gently wrapped her hand around his while still facing forward.

"…? A-Alya…?"

He was struck with panic when she suddenly held his hand, but she didn't even glance in his direction as she quietly said:

"…You don't have to pretend around me anymore."

"Huh?"

"I want to be there for you, too. I will be there for you by your side to support you. I mean, I am your partner, aren't I?" Alisa pouted, seemingly in a foul mood, but anybody could see that she was only trying to hide her embarrassment. She then continued to express her frustrations, maybe not realizing how obvious she was being.

"I'm *always* the one being helped, and I don't like that. So you *better* let me help you out sometimes, too."

"Pfft! Is that an order?" Masachika laughed at the contrast between her adorable request and the harsh way she put it. Immediately, Alisa shot him a piercing glare and started digging her fingernails into his hand she was holding.

"Shut up and stop laughing."

"Ow, ow, ow. Sorry."

However, he couldn't help but crack a smile, even while apologizing through the pain, and her unnatural yet straightforward words warmed the darkness in his heart.

“Thanks. Just knowing you feel that way makes me happy, and that’s more than I could ever ask for,” he softly admitted as he gazed directly into her eyes. And that was how he really felt. Alisa’s words and actions saved him from his self-loathing. Nevertheless, Alisa herself seemed to take what he said the wrong way.

“What’s your problem? You’re still going to be like that after everything I said?”

She frowned, but this time, she was truly upset. Masachika was at a loss for a few moments until he realized that she probably thought he was refusing her help and instantly began to panic.

“You’ve got the wrong—”

“Whatever,” Alisa hissed in a soft voice as she dropped his hand and turned around.

“H-hey…?”

“Don’t follow me.”

She left him with those words before briskly walking away. He reached out to stop her, but it was already too late as his hand only touched air.

“Uh…”

*Should I go after her?* Masachika wondered, when all of a sudden, someone else tugged at his sleeve from behind. He turned around to find Yuki and noticed the portable shrine was getting closer as well.

“Masachika, hand me my camera.”

“Hmm? Oh, right.”

After giving her the digital camera, she promptly took a picture of the approaching shrine.

“President Touya, Vice President Chisaki, let me get a picture of you two together.”

“Wait. Really?”

“Oh, wow. Thanks, Suou.”

Once she took their picture, she got the others to join in and started taking multiple photos of the group. Soon after Masachika absentmindedly began to watch, Alisa finally returned.

“Oh, hey. Welcome…back…?”

He was relieved to see her…while also puzzled to see what she was holding. It was a white foam take-out box, and peeking out from under the slightly ajar lid were eight takoyaki balls.

“…You wanted takoyaki *that* badly?”

“No,” she replied with a glare, before adding with a smirk, “let’s play a game.”

“What? A game?”

“Yes.”

At that moment, the leading portable shrine was already right in front of them, so the others were preoccupied with that. Masachika and Alisa gazed into each other’s eyes, unfazed by the loud noises around them.

“Doesn’t it annoy you that we ran away…just like Yuki said?”

“Huh?! Uh… Yeah, but… Like… You know?”

Masachika suddenly remembered Yuki’s order when she was king —to kiss—and his heart began to race out of control. Even then, he glanced back at Yuki behind him to make sure she wasn’t listening and lowered his voice.

“But we can’t do that, right?”

“I don’t mind. What bothers me is her thinking I’m a coward for running away.”

“Uh-huh…”

Her eyes were brimming with determination as she gazed into his…which were slowly glazing over, but he still hadn’t given up. He pointed to the others with his eyes as if to convince her it was a bad idea.

“You want…to do it here…?”

The nervous question made Alisa smirk in satisfaction.

“That’s where the game begins. If you win, I will console you once we get back to the cottage. For example…you can lay your head down in my lap while I gently rub your head and kiss you on the forehead.”

“S-seriously?” he genuinely asked after unconsciously imagining the situation. Alisa, the ice queen, was going to let him lie in her lap while she rubbed his head? And if that alone wasn’t enough, she was going to kiss him on the forehead, too? He wasn’t even depressed anymore, which meant he didn’t need to be consoled, but that proposal was far too attractive to turn down for a young man like Masachika.

“Of course, this doesn’t come risk-free. My lap isn’t cheap, after all.”

Alisa provocatively raised her chin.

“…Uh-huh. What do I have to do if I lose?”

“Hmm… How about you get me out of here and take me somewhere else?”

“What?”

“I want you to lead me by the hand and take me somewhere we

can be alone, then kiss me. Yes… Passionately, okay?"

His cheek suddenly twitched.

"…You really know how to embarrass a guy, huh? What is this, the climax to a movie?"

"*Giggle.* The others would be shocked, to say the least. But I have to do something embarrassing if you win, so this is only fair."

"…So what's the game?"

Alisa let out a brief, smug laugh while holding up her box of takoyaki in an amused manner.

"The rules are simple. We're playing Russian roulette with these takoyaki. Whoever gets the bad one, loses."

"'Russian'…? Really, Alya? Wait. What kind of food stall sells those? …And what's inside the 'bad' one?"

"A ton of wasabi."

"Just like when they do it on TV… Couldn't whoever eats it just pretend it's not hot, though?"

Right after he said that, he realized that playing dumb would be meaningless, since there were only two of them, but Alisa shrugged as if she thought he had a point.

"If that happens, then the other has to guess which one was filled with wasabi, and if they get it wrong, then it's a tie, and we play again."

"Couldn't you still lie even if the other guesses right…?"

"I expect you to be a gentleman."

"Yeah, yeah. You got it."

"Great. I'll let you pick who goes first."

"…You can go first."

After Masachika thought about it for a moment and decided to go second, Alisa immediately pierced the closest octopus puff with her toothpick and threw it into her mouth.

"Here you go."

"…Thanks."

Her provocative smile as she handed him the take-out box let Masachika know.

*She rigged this game somehow, didn't she?*

It was all very suspicious, especially when Masachika had a huge advantage with how the rules were, since he loved spicy food. And yet Alisa was unbelievably confident for some reason. She didn't seem to be worried she was going to get the wasabi-filled one…which only meant one thing: She was cheating. The only reason she was acting so

tough was because she knew she was going to win no matter what.

*Ah, so that's what this is about. She wants me to pay for being "inconsiderate."*

She apparently did not like how he'd phrased how happy he was when she said she would be there for him. But even after Masachika realized what the game was really about, he simply shrugged.

*It's not like I can back down now; she already ate one, so that would make her angrier… She completely misunderstood what I said, though.*

But a misunderstanding didn't change a thing because, in a way, he still ended up embarrassing a young woman who put herself out there. It took a lot of courage to do what she did…which meant that he needed to fall for her trap. He was going to allow her to win, act all upset, and let Alisa laugh at him. It was a small sacrifice to make to cheer her up.

*Hmm… I'm not a big fan of how wasabi's spicy, so I guess I should be careful I don't just spit it out…*

After he came to accept this harsh reality, he ate an octopus puff… and soon after had his second one.

*Huh? I'm still not getting any wasabi yet.*

It was not only unexpected, but he also started to get the sense that something was off when he was on his third takoyaki.

"Looks like this is the last one for me," Alisa announced, showing no signs of hesitation as she tossed the last puff into her mouth and smiled provokingly. There was absolutely nothing about her expression that made it seem like her tongue was burning.

*Was it just a coincidence? She's still acting like she won. Did I just get lucky this entire time and pick all the good ones?*

"Come on, there's still one left."

"Y-yeah…"

She shoved the take-out box in his hands midthought, but he still didn't quit speculating, even while piercing the octopus puff with the toothpick.

*What's this feeling…? I think something's wrong. Alisa was clearly at a disadvantage when she suggested this game, but she seemed unworried the entire time. She has to be cheating or— Oh.*

That was when it hit him. There was only one thing that could explain what was happening. She wasn't cheating. Quite the opposite, actually. What was missing was…

*…a wasabi-filled takoyaki. What if there was never one to begin with?*

Then that would mean that all his presumptions were wrong.

There was no surefire plan for victory. It was the opposite. This game was all just…

*If there were no wasabi puffs, then that would obviously mean I couldn't lose…which means I would have to guess which one of hers was the wasabi puff…which also means that she gets to decide if I'm right or wrong. In other words…*

The game was set up for Alisa to lose no matter what. The instant he realized this, he was overcome with an almost indescribable feeling. It was a mix of exhaustion but heartwarming joy as well, causing him to smirk bittersweetly.

What a roundabout way to console someone. She pretended it was a game so she could make the excuse that she didn't have a choice because she lost…just so she could make Masachika feel better. What a compassionate partner. But…

*It was my fault she felt like she had to do this in order to cheer me up…*

Once it all came together in his mind, he stuck the last octopus puff in his mouth and chewed…but of course, it wasn't spicy at all. Just then, Alisa smugly smirked and whispered:

"**<**I win.**>**"

That Russian alone was enough to make him sure his hypothesis was right.

*Well, now that I know what she's up to, I can't just let her win.*

Masachika suddenly opened his eyes wide and quickly covered his mouth.

"Gwah…! Ahng…! Mmm…!"

"…?! H-huh?!"

"…! A-ahhh! Hff… Hff… Looks like I lost."

He swallowed the octopus puff and looked up, where his eyes were met with Alisa's puzzled, blinking gaze. The blend of bewilderment and disbelief on her face made him smirk. Immediately, he swiped the take-out box out of her hand while wrapping his other arm tightly around Alisa's waist, reeling her in.

"Shall we go, milady?" he asked mischievously with her in his arm.

"Huh? Uh… Yes…?"

The instant she agreed with wide-open eyes, he took her hand and began to run.

"M-Masachika?!"

He could hear Yuki shout out to him from behind in astonishment,

but he continued to run without looking back, running toward the shrine gate while leaving the other five behind. He cut through the crowd, making sure Alisa wouldn't trip. But once he passed the portable shrines and saw the shrine gate…

*Boom!*

…he heard a loud pop and saw a large firework illuminating the night sky out of the corner of his eye. Even then, he continued to run. Only after he passed through the shrine gate, ran down the stone steps, and stepped onto the small gravel parking lot did he stop. The parking area was on a small hill with a view of the city lights along the seaside…and also a perfect view of the fireworks blooming in the night sky.

"…"

He remained silent as he walked her through the parking area. Only when they reached the wooden fence did he finally let her hand go. They didn't say a word to each other for the next ten seconds, gazing up at the fireworks in the sky, when…

"Hey," Alisa suddenly snapped with a sharp tone.

"Hmm?"

When he looked to his side, Alisa was scowling, but he was not surprised in the least, since he knew exactly why.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"What ever could you mean?"

"…! Don't play dumb. I know you didn't lose, so why did you pretend to?"

Alisa herself knew for a fact that there was no wasabi-filled puff. In other words, she knew that he was acting…which meant he let her win. She raised her eyebrows, clearly wanting an explanation, but Masachika calmly tilted his head as if he were the one confused.

"Let me ask you something first."

"…What?"

"Why were you planning on pretending to lose?"

That was when it hit her. He had seen right through her scheme, her goal—everything. Her eyes widened, a crimson hue tinting her cheeks, and he smiled smugly.

"Bwa-ha-ha! You've still got a lot to learn before you can catch me off guard!"

After boastfully cackling, he calmed down and serenely gazed into Alisa's eyes.

"Thank you for trying to make me feel better. But I'm fine now.

Seriously. Just knowing how you feel makes me so happy."

Alisa opened and closed her mouth repeatedly after she heard how serious he was…until at last, she frowned and swiftly turned her head away from him, facing the fireworks. He smirked and faced the fireworks as well. For the next few long moments, they silently admired the show, watching it vividly coloring the night sky with each air-rumbling pop. Experiencing every one with her entire body, Alisa suddenly whispered:

"…They're so beautiful."

"They are."

But right after he said that, he realized what he should have said.

*Ah, dammit. You're supposed to say, "Not as beautiful as you." At least, I think that's the line…*

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye and saw the colorful fireworks of ruby and emerald illuminating her profile from within the darkness. It was a beauty that would take your breath away, and yet…

*Hmm… It's still pretty dark, though. She's way more beautiful during the day, when you can clearly see her.*

That unromantic, worthless thought was the first thing that popped into his head. But at the very same time, he felt that it wouldn't be right if he didn't say the line. He faced forward once more, waiting for the right moment to say it—waiting for the fireworks to vigorously shoot up and explode in the sky.

You're beautiful.

"Ты красивая."

The whisper was swallowed by the explosion shaking the heavens. After glancing at Alisa out of the corner of his eye and making sure she hadn't heard, he faced forward once more, the mortification slowly starting to creep in.

*Gwaaaaaah! I'm never doing that again! I thought I was gonna die of embarrassment!*

He clenched his teeth hard to make sure he could keep a straight face while desperately hiding his embarrassment…when he felt a hand softly being placed on his right shoulder.

*What the—?*

Thinking he was being tapped on the shoulder, he turned…

"Mn…"

…and Alisa's lips pressed against his cheek. The feeling of her lips and the tip of her nose touching his cheek was undeniable. It was undoubtedly a kiss, and he froze. His brain completely stopped, and he

couldn't even hear the fireworks any longer. Only the faint sound of a kiss reached his malfunctioning ears as Alisa's warmth quietly left his side. Only then was he finally able to move again. When he glanced to his side, Alisa was smirking and struggling to prevent a bashful smile.

"'You've still got a lot to learn before you can catch me off guard,' was it?" she repeated with a bit of a smug tone as she fidgeted with her hair. Masachika was instantly reminded of what he'd said a few moments before and of Yuki's order as well, but Alisa's kiss was so shocking that he couldn't be bothered by any of that.

"Al— You…"

But he was lost for words while he placed a hand on his cheek.

"So? Where are you going to kiss me?" she asked with a triumphant expression, slightly lifting her chin and making his breath catch in his throat.

*If I…*

If he grabbed Alisa's shoulders right now…would she let him…? He promptly shook his head to rid himself of the ridiculous thought that came to mind and realized that he should definitely kiss her back on the cheek. However, her unparalleled beauty emerging from within the darkness made it impossible for him to act fast. Having his lips pressing against her fair skin felt blasphemous, and once he began to think like that, even kissing her on the back of her hand seemed to be an unforgivable act. Then perhaps over her clothes would be better? The thought briefly crossed his mind until he almost immediately realized how much of a creep he would look like for essentially kissing her belongings. There was always the option to back out, but he felt that wouldn't be the gentlemanly thing to do, since she had already kissed him.

"……!"

At the end of his seconds-long direful struggle was the answer. He took a step forward in front of Alisa and extended his right hand to the side of her face.

"Mn…"

She squinted an eye, perhaps tickled by his finger brushing against her ear, but she promptly opened it once more and gazed straight into his eyes. He gazed into hers, his hand softly sliding down her face and scooping up her hair…as he pressed the tips of her hair against his lips and immediately let go.

*Gaaaaaaaaah!!*

Immediately, he was on the ground, closing his eyes while

writhing in agony…in his imagination. His own actions were far too embarrassing for him to handle.

*I mean, her hair?! Seriously?! Think about it calmly for a second! If anything, that's something that only cool, handsome guys can pull off!!*

Kissing her bare skin wasn't going to be possible, so in an act of desperation, he'd decided to go with her hair. However, after actually thinking about it, he came to the conclusion that what he'd done was extremely pretentious, so he started imagining himself slamming his head violently against a wall.

"Heh… Ha-ha!"

He timidly opened his eyes to the sound of soft laughter and discovered Alisa was holding a hand over her mouth and looking up at him with a genuinely amused gaze.

"*Giggle*… I thought you were going to kiss me on the lips for a second there…but my hair? Seriously?"

"…Oh, shut up. Sorry for being such a coward."

He swiftly looked away to escape his own embarrassment and sulk a bit, which only made Alisa laugh even more. As he watched her out of the corner of his eye, she lifted up her hair that he'd kissed…and pressed the tips against her lips as well.

"…?!"

He stared in mute astonishment as she grinned at him.

"Wimp," she sneered provokingly before quickly grabbing his arm and wrapping hers around it. She squeezed him tightly, slightly resting her head on his shoulder while facing the fireworks once more.

"What am I ever going to do with a partner who understands absolutely nothing about women?"

Her tone was jaded, but her smile was mischievous.

*Oh… That's why…*

…He finally realized it when he saw that look on her face. There was no way he wouldn't.

*Alya, you…*

Masachika had been refusing to see it for so long, but there was no way he could deny it anymore. No longer could he pretend like he didn't notice that she had feelings for him. And once he realized that, it felt as if his heart was being twisted in his chest.

*But I…*

He looked up at the sky, tightly clenching his fist, but now the once genuinely beautiful fireworks seemed fleeting and melancholic for some reason. The fireworks bloomed and dispersed in the sky one after another, as if to create the perfect moment for him—oblivious to how he felt while the ephemeral, beautiful lights painted their nestling shadows onto the ground.

EPILOGUE

# A Past That Mustn't Be Forgotten

"Oh, Masachika. Are you going somewhere?"

"Yeah, I'll be back soon."

"Be careful."

"I will."

Masachika waved good-bye to his grandmother as he left the house. He was visiting his grandparents' place after the student council beach vacation was over, and today, he was out on a mission.

"Let's do this!"

After pumping himself up a bit, he began his journey under the hot sun.

"…"

While he'd realized Alisa had feelings for him during his vacation, he didn't know how strong those feelings were. They could be very faint or shallow to the point that Alisa herself didn't even realize she was in love. Or maybe these feelings could be clearly defined in her mind. And if it was the latter, did Alisa want to be more than just friends? Masachika had no idea, but now that he knew how she felt, he could no longer continue acting like he didn't…and if he was to pretend as if he hadn't noticed or something, he would still need to find out how he felt. He needed to decide how he would reciprocate her affection.

*Am I…in love with Alya?*

He'd asked himself that question countless times ever since that

day at the shrine. If he had to choose between love or hate, then of course, he loved her. That was easy. There were times that he even felt something similar to being in love. She made his heart race from time to time. But…

*I don't know…*

…if you asked him if he was in love with her, he honestly didn't know— No. He didn't actually want to know, and he knew why.

*If I remember what it feels like to love again…*

…then he would be reminded of that girl he'd fallen in love with so long ago. He would remember how much he despised himself for ever forgetting her, and he would start doubting his own heart. That was why he'd pretended not to notice. That was why he'd always run away from confrontation.

*But…I can't keep running any longer.*

He had to face reality. He couldn't use that girl as an excuse to avoid falling in love anymore. He had to say good-bye to his past love once and for all…and move on. There was someone who loved him. And there was someone who'd given him courage.

*"You can love again."*

He tucked those words, said to him with that loving embrace, into his heart as he moved forward—as he headed toward that park filled with the memories he'd shared with that little girl from so long ago.

"…!"

The closer he got to the park and the more the familiar the path he took, the more it tore at his heart, the disgust and sense of rejection only growing stronger. His legs felt unbelievably heavy, though he was ready to face his past. *Maybe I should head back. I can do this some other time.* The excuses popped into his head one after another. But even then, he continued walking. Greasy sweat unrelated to the hot sun ran down his back while his guts twisted. Still, he pushed forward. In the end, it took him over thirty minutes to make the ten-minute walk to the park.

"…Here it is."

But his heart strangely felt at peace the moment he saw the entrance. It was like being scared of the unknown and then learning what it actually was. The fear was gone. The sudden relief even made Masachika himself feel somewhat deflated.

*Maybe I was actually wasting my time all these years avoiding this place…?*

Or perhaps it was merely because this wasn't the most memorable

place to him. This wasn't the playground area with all the fun equipment that he'd always met that little girl at. That place was only a small portion of this massive park. That place of his memories was at the opposite end of the park down this path.

"I guess I just have to take this step by step," he muttered to himself, but hidden behind his lighthearted tone was a strong determination that fueled his next move forward. Families, a man running, and many other people passed him by while he looked around and slowly pushed forward down the path.

*Oh, that's where we used to play frisbee.*

The large open space, surrounded by clusters of trees, reawakened Masachika's childhood memories. One after another, the memories came back to him as his eyes drifted.

*I used to hide over there all the time when we played hide-and-seek… Oh, that roller slide… We used to love that thing…*

There was nothing special about any of it. Nothing more than childish games. But for someone who grew up never knowing how to be or play like a kid, those days he'd spent with her were always brilliantly shining in his mind. Her genuine praise. Her blue eyes gazing straight into his. Those things made him feel like he had a place in the world. They'd warmed his frozen heart after he was thrown into despair by his mother. He felt like he could do anything for her.

*This path… Yeah… This is where we got attacked by that dog…*

He began to fondly remember his past, and it was strangely comforting. The days he'd spent with her were still as beautiful and brilliant as ever…and it didn't tear at his heart. He wasn't distressed by a sense of loss. And that was why he was relieved. But when he suddenly saw the fountain in the playground area, he froze.

*This is… This was the last time we…*

It was at this moment that he finally realized…that the seal locking away his memories had been broken.

◇

"**<**Masaaachika.**>**"

"**<**Yeah?**>**"

After we had finished playing just like we always did, she called me by that mispronounced name instead of my nickname for the first time in what felt like forever. I turned around, wondering what it could be…and noticed that the always-cheerful little girl…was

wearing a gloomy expression for a change.

“_____”

Yes… She told me something. Something shocking. But not in Russian. She told me in Japanese. I was petrified. I was in a trance, and by the time I came back to my senses, she was gone. I thought it had to have been some sort of mistake; I was going to ask her about it once more tomorrow, so I went to the park the next day, but she never came. I visited the park numerous times after that day, but no matter how long I searched, I could never find her.

*Maybe I’ll run into her today?*

*I didn’t see her today, either, but surely tomorrow…*

It was an endless loop of faint hope that was always met with fruitless despair. It was around the one-month mark when I finally came to a certain realization: *I’m never going to see her again.*

Shortly after that, I was taken from my new home with my grandparents and brought back to the Suou household, where my father told me that he and my mother were getting a divorce. I was instantly reminded of a conversation from long ago.

*“Wow! He’s so cool!”*

When was that? I had to be in kindergarten when I saw a police officer and said that to my father.

*“Right? I actually used to want to be a police officer way back in the day,”* he’d replied.

*“Why didn’t you, then?”* I’d innocently asked, as any kid would.

*“Because I found something even more important than my dream.”* He’d grinned, but there was a sadness somewhere in that smile. I didn’t understand what he’d meant back then, but soon after that, I learned that the Suous were a family of diplomats spanning multiple generations, and my father had given up his dream to become one in order to get married. I was touched. The “something” that was even more important than my father’s dream was my mother. He’d chosen the woman he loved over his dream. *He’s so cool. I can’t believe how cool Father is.* I deeply respected my father from the bottom of my heart. And yet…

*“I’m sorry, Masachika. Your mother and I are going to be living in different houses from now on.”*

And yet after everything he sacrificed—after all his hard work—she betrayed him. Why wasn’t he— Why wasn’t I rewarded for all my hard work?

*“Okay.”*

I didn't have to understand. I didn't have to know why. Mother—My birth mother was a pathetic excuse for a human being who stopped showing her husband and her child love. That was all I needed to know.

*"Then…I wish to— I'm going with you."*

I didn't care anymore. Forget this. Everything was a waste of time. I did everything just so she would look at me and praise me, and it was all for nothing. Pointless. Useless. Trash. And if something was trash, then why not just throw it away? That mother, who stopped acknowledging all my hard work and shunned me? In the trash. That grandfather, who still forced me to continue working hard? Trash. This entire family, who made my father give up on his dreams? I didn't need them anymore. All I needed were my father and my little sister, Yuki. They were the only family I needed. As long as I had Dad and Yuki…

*"I'm sorry, Masachika. I'm gonna stay here…"*

But when I visited my sister's room, she sat up in her bed and quietly told me that without hesitation. It was something I never even dreamed she would say. I was taken aback by her unexpectedly strong determination.

*"Are you worried about your asthma? Don't worry. It won't get worse even if we move to a new house. If you need someone to take care of you, then we could just bring Ayano…"*

Although confused, I was driven by my impatience to persuade her to come with me, but she never nodded.

*"Why?! There's nothing good here! You're better off without this family!"*

I let my emotions get the best of me and shouted obscenities, mocking my mother and grandfather.

*"But Mother will be all alone if I leave…"* Yuki smiled somewhat helplessly.

That was all it took. Those words. That expression. There was nothing else I could say. I immediately understood the reality of the situation. My delicate, sickly little sister, who I thought I always had to protect, was far more mature than I ever was. She had a will far stronger than mine and more love in her heart than I could have ever dreamed of having. I was suddenly embarrassed of myself. I realized how pathetic I was for insulting my own family and losing my self-control. But the little pride I had as Masachika Suou wouldn't let me admit it.

*“Fine! Do whatever you want!”*

And that was the last thing I said before leaving Yuki’s room, even though I realized deep down inside that I was only making things more embarrassing for myself.

*She’ll come around and apologize.*

*Yuki can’t live without me.*

*I’ll forgive her if she says she’s sorry.*

That was what my ego was telling me every day I didn’t see her. When the day finally came around to say good-bye, I looked at her standing by my mother’s side, and that was when I realized how much of a fool I was.

I was the one who decided to leave, and yet I felt like I was being abandoned. I didn’t feel any better. I felt empty when I left the Suou household. It was as if a cold breeze was blowing through my empty heart. The entire time, Dad was apologizing to me as if this was all his fault.

The days just idly went by for a while after that. I didn’t have my grandfather’s expectations to meet, that girl who used to praise me so much was now gone, and I didn’t have extra lessons or extracurricular activities I had to do anymore. All I had was peace. Too much of it. I didn’t know what I should do or even what I wanted to do as the days meaninglessly went by. When I was in my sixth year of elementary school and had to start thinking which middle school I’d attend, I suddenly got the idea to try for Seirei Academy.

It was, in a way, my revenge. I was going to get into the school that my grandfather wanted me to go to without any help from the Suou household. That would teach them. That would show my grandfather and mother just how amazing I was. It would show them that they lost an unparalleled successor to the family because of their stupidity. That twisted motivation was why I belatedly began studying for the entrance exam…and ended up getting in easily.

Heh. How’d ya like that? I got into *the* Seirei Academy and only had to study half a year to do it. I’m amazing. I’m special. Those were the things my ego told me while I joined the opening ceremony as if I were on top of the world. That is, until I saw the student who scored the highest on their entrance exam give a speech.

*“Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Yuki Suou, and I will be speaking on behalf of all the new students.”*

It was my sister, who I’d left behind at the Suou household. Her posture was perfect, and she spoke with such dignity. Seeing her

healthy and all grown…finally made me realize that I wasn't special. I was replaceable. What was really worthless— What was really trash… was me. I always let my emotions get the best of me. I always let others decide what I should do for me. I couldn't do anything without relying on others and searching for reasons within them to do something. And worst of all, if I decided I was going to depend on someone for something and they didn't react how I wanted them to, I got disappointed, even if I didn't have any right to. And because of that, I couldn't love my own family, and I forced everything onto my little sister, who I loved dearly.

But even then, that little sister was so kind to her brother. She would only show her nerdy side to him and act like her stupid, adorable self so that he wouldn't feel guilty. She would never be embarrassed to show him love. Despite already bearing the important responsibility of the entire Suou household as the successor, she still tried to protect their bond as a family. She was mature with a big heart and a brilliantly glittering soul, and each time I saw that, I…

◇

*"Sigh…"*

After taking a seat at the bench by the fountain, Masachika deeply exhaled and felt a sharp pain in his chest. He felt awful. It started with remembering the last day he'd seen that girl, and he just kept recalling one bad memory after another. He honestly felt sick.

"I want to die."

Whether he had feelings for Alisa or not wasn't the problem. It was cocky of him to even think he was good enough for her. Him—a guy with nothing, only wandering aimlessly waiting for someone to save him. What would he have to do to be good enough for her?

"…I'm such an idiot."

He'd never been in any position to consider if he had feelings for her, but he had been surrounded by such amazing people with brilliant souls for so long that he'd started to feel like he was one of them. But perhaps that was all in his head.

"…You're scum."

The self-abuse unconsciously slipped off his tongue. The old Masachika was an even bigger scumbag than he had imagined. He'd always thought that it was completely his mother's fault, but he was wrong. He knew that now. The one who broke that family was…

nobody other than himself.

While there were still plenty of things that he felt conflicted about, his mother had been careful not to destroy their family. She was holding the last line of defense by not yelling at his dad in front of them.

And yet Masachika alone broke that last line of defense. He made his resentment for his mother no secret, and perhaps that was the last straw that led to his parents getting divorced, because maybe she believed that she could no longer protect the bond holding the family together any longer. The family was split in half after that, and it was Yuki who was still desperately trying to protect that family bond that Masachika had shattered. It was his little sister who loved her family more than anything else in the world, and she did it all with the weight of becoming the successor to the Suou family on her shoulders.

"…!"

Masachika suddenly wanted to cry. His chest trembled while the welling tears were burning the corners of his eyes. Was it because he felt spineless? Or perhaps it was his love for his sister? Was it pity? He didn't know, but he clenched his teeth as he fought back the tears. All he wanted to do now was tightly hold Yuki—her small, delicate body—in his arms and hug her.

*"Sigh…"*

His sigh was mixed with countless emotions, but he stood up once more. He still hadn't finished what he had come to do. He was here to visit all the places he'd spent with that little girl from so long ago and say good-bye to his past love. However, he felt that this was enough. He'd never be good enough for Alisa. In fact, he wasn't good enough for anyone. He despised his family, and it destroyed them. He couldn't even protect his one and only sister, who he loved more than anyone else in the entire world. He didn't deserve love that he would get from forming a new family bond. Even if he did get that love…he wouldn't be able to cherish it like he should.

"…Let's go home," he muttered to nobody but himself and began to walk. The summer sunlight was so hot that it was burning his skin, and yet he couldn't feel a thing. He was frozen inside. It was as if his organs had been removed and replaced with a cold clay. His entire body weighed down on him like mud, and he felt disgusting.

Masachika began to walk mindlessly down the path until he eventually reached a fork and stopped.

"…"

The path to his right was the park exit. The path to his left would take him to the most memorable place he'd shared with that little girl: the open space filled with playground equipment, and the spot they used to play together for hours on end. Masachika hesitated…then faced the path to his left. Not even he knew exactly why. Perhaps he wanted to take one last look at every area of the park so he would never have to go there again. Or maybe he had given into the despair and turned to hurting himself, wanting to tear out his already aching heart. Regardless, he pushed forward, lowering his heavy head and staring at the ground all the way. Before long, the paved pathway became gravel, and when he slowly lifted his head, there it was. The playground was much smaller than he remembered.

The sandbox was framed by green stones. Four red swings were lined up side by side. A small fence stood behind it and in front of the road to prevent children from running into traffic. He used to always hate weaving in between the small, staggered fence panels before he could run over and see her. Masachika chuckled softly while recalling his past thoughts, then looked to his left, where that dome filled with holes stood…and on top of it was…

"Huh…?"

…a familiar figure. Someone whom he had never expected to see —someone who wasn't supposed to be there. His mind went blank. As he stood stock-still in mute amazement, the person sitting and looking at the sky shifted her gaze toward him. And once she saw that it was him, she stood up, placed her legs against the curved dome surface, and half slid off all the way down. Once she hit the ground, she slowly approached him before stopping right before his eyes. She smiled nostalgically…yet wistfully as well. Masachika was speechless. And with countless emotions swelling in her heart, she told him:

"Long time no see—"

Масачка!

послесловие

# Afterword

Hey. It's me, Sunsunsun. I always worry so much about what I should say first to greet you whenever I write these. "And after all that worrying, you went with just 'hey'?" Yeah, I know. Give me a break. After thinking and worrying about it until you get sick, you usually go with something simple. That's just how these things are. In other words, this one-word greeting is proof that I put a lot of thought into this. At least a whole ten seconds.

At any rate, there is something I need to apologize to all of you for. I have to apologize for my boring afterword in Volume 3. I was just so happy to receive a shout-out from Miki Yoshikawa that I forgot to make the afterword a little fun. That wasn't right. I am a writer, after all, and it is my job to move your hearts with my words. Therefore, it is only natural that I try to make you laugh or even smirk when you read the afterword as well. I mean, I've never seen any other novelist do that, but that's another story.

I usually read light novels written by famous authors, so I'm sure when you get that big, you start to take everything very seriously, unlike someone like me, who just writes the first thing that comes to mind, then unloads this stream-of-consciousness gibberish onto their editor like, "Here ya go! All done!" Surely, those veterans contemplate and consider all their options before eventually deciding on something extremely simple. Yep, we went full circle. "Hey." Foreshadowing… aka a "forced analogy."

Oh, right. There's something else I needed to improve on from last time. And that's the comment I wrote on the sleeve of last volume's cover. It was something like, "It isn't a hurdle. It's a clothesline, so place it as high as you need it," but soon after I wrote that, it hit me: Clotheslines were usually higher than hurdles. I was shocked. The hurdles I had to jump over in PE back when I was a kid were basically low enough that I could straddle them if I wanted to. You can't straddle clotheslines, though. You'd have to do a belly roll, like hang over it on your belly, if you wanted to even have a chance. In Japanese, by the way, the English word *belly* is written ベリー, which is also how we write *berry*, so I am sure you can imagine how confused the average Japanese person would be if they heard me say, "belly roll." "Berry roll? Like strawberry roll cakes? Raspberry roll cakes?" That's what they'd think.

Remember this next time you're in PE and doing hurdles, so you can smugly show off how much more you know than everyone else. If someone says, "You're acting pretty smug for knowing something you just read in the afterword of a book that you didn't even fact-check," well, they're probably one of us. Whisper to them, "Alya is…?" And if they answer "adorable," then you'll know for sure they're one of us. You must share a firm handshake after that. But if they, for some bizarre reason, say, "I prefer Yuki," then they're the enemy, and you are to introduce both strawberry (right fist) and raspberry (left fist) to their belly. There are times in life where the fists need to do the talking. Don't worry. It could be the start of a beautiful friendship. By the way, I tried it once, and my former professors in university, my friends, and even my family all disowned me, and now I have no one. Weird, huh? I still don't know what I did wrong. Maybe life isn't like the comic books where you can become friends with someone after beating the crap out of each other. Anyway, I plan to stop using my fists to do the talking and go straight to knees next time.*

(*Don't try this at home. Or anywhere. To anyone.)

Okay, that's enough garbage to fill up the pages. Now, I want to thank everyone who made this volume a possibility:

Miyakawa, my editor who worked hard once again to get this published.

Momoco for all the erot— *Bfffmmm?!* Ahem—for all the wonderful illustrations.

Sabamizore for the adorable tsundere valentine drawing of Alya.

The legendary illustrator Noizi Ito for her guest illustration.

And everyone else who helped make this project come together, which includes every reader who picked up a copy.

I thank you all sooo much.

Until we meet again next volume.

Alya, I look forward to continuing to work with you!

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